



Light

Belle Gromer

LIGHT



For whomever listens.

It has been so long since I last spoke, it is almost foreign to my tongue and lips. But I am going to tell you this story anyway because I think someone should hear it. Someone who is not me. I cannot promise that you will like it or that you will even choose to finish reading it. I cannot promise that this book will ever see the light of day, but I am going to tell it to you because I need something to do. Perhaps you can write it down and turn it into something great. I would not mind. I will not even mind if you do not read it. I just need to tell it to someone, and here you are.

When I tell you my story, I will promise not to lie or twist the truth in anyway. I will only say it as it happened. Sometimes, this may be hard for you to read, and I apologize for that. Sometimes it might make you sad or angry because that is how I felt. If you want the truth, I most often felt fear. I hope as you listen, you too will see the light that I saw.

Here is my story as told to you by me, Lucian.

I did not know how long it had been since my first day in the room, and I had long ago lost any sense of time. I had lost any feeling, any strength, and any everything. I had become indifferent to my situation, which frightened me. I was always cold in there and sometimes I could see my breath in the candle's light. My hands trembled whenever I tried to do anything with them, and my grasp was weak. My hair was in disarray, my clothes hung limply against my frame, and I could not bring myself to care. My vision had been adjusted to the dim candlelight for so long that I doubted my ability to see properly if I were ever to leave this place. I doubted my ability to stand as well because there were chains which prevented me from standing. They were bolted in the bottom of the wall, the chains, with cuffs that embraced my ankles and wrists. Besides the chains, myself, and the candle, there was nothing else in the room. I had not seen another human for what felt like years.

Sometimes, when I tried to sleep, a figure bathed in shadow would open the door and push warm bread and water to me. I ate the bread slowly, and drank the water in a gulp, then the figure would open the door again and take the empty glass. This did not always happen. It happened at times when I attempted to rest, or when I used the rusty chains to scratch something on the concrete wall. Those were the times when I was interrupted. After I was interrupted during my artwork several times, I gave up. All I ever did now was keep my back against the wall with my knees pulled close. I

sometimes stared at the little melting candle. Other times I pressed my forehead against my knees and closed my eyes. I had not cried in a long time because when I cried the first time, it was only to feel sorry for myself. Well, I did not want to be sorry for myself. I wanted to not feel, so I stopped crying. I stopped trying to remember how I had gotten here. I stopped thinking about myself and instead thought about the candle's light.

I told you before that I had not spoken in a long time prior to whispering this story to you, and that was true. I need you to understand that when this story first began, I had not spoken for an exceedingly long time. I will speak soon in my story, and I will tell it in past tense, because I am telling you this story after it already took place. I already saw all of this happen, heard it happen, was there when it happened. But I am here, telling it to you, because I need someone else to hear it. I need to say all of it aloud to someone who will listen. I hope you will continue to listen.

On days when the room was especially cold, I scooted as near as I could to the candle, which was never close enough. I would sit there, shivering, as I stared at the candle that was never within reach. Sometimes I wondered if it stayed away on purpose, but then I would remember that was ridiculous. Most days, I sat alone by the hard wall with my eyes closed. I had too much time to wonder and think in that room, but I tried to stay away from things that would make me think of myself. I thought only of the candle and its light because I did not want my depressing circumstances to crush me like I knew they would if I ever dared to think about them.

I knew the little candle in the center of my little room had gone out many times before. It never occurred to me to wonder why there were still flames on the wick or how it turned into a new candle, but I will tell you why it happened. When the flame was nearly out, or it had already gone out, the shadow figure would wait patiently for me to fall asleep. Then he would open the door and replace the stubby, unlit candle with a tall, warm candle. I had never seen this happen, as I was always asleep, but that was the way it happened. That was why there was always a candle in my room with its tiny fire dancing upon the wick.

It was during one of the cold nights, with a freshly lit candle, when I noticed the shadows. I had never seen them before, and the extra darkness confused me. It did not bother me, as I did not allow things to bother me in the room, but it was strange to see a change in there. Except, seeing the shadows was not the only change. They

whispered while dancing around the candle's flickering flame. I watched them, and I listened, but I could not understand what they spoke of. After a long time of listening to them and watching them, I dropped my head to my knees and closed my eyes.

"Why do you shiver?" I heard one of them murmur.

I did not lift my head, though I did answer softly. "I'm cold."

"And scared?" another teased, its form shifting in the small flame.

Despite my attempts to not feel things, I had never succeeded in ridding myself of the fear. I wanted to keep this to myself, but something about speaking to someone changed my mind, even if it was darkness. "Yes."

The shadows were quiet and still for a moment. To me, they seemed confused. When one of them spoke again, it was the quietest I had heard. "Why don't you lie, like the others? Why not pretend you're free?" it asked.

Without looking up, I shrugged. "I don't know."

The shadows were silent after that. I sighed and felt a shiver run down my spine, but I was accustomed to coldness. It made me shiver, and I was never warm, but I had learned to accept it. I pulled my legs closer to my chest and rested my chin atop my knees, staring pointlessly at the light of the candle's wick. It was mostly orange, dancing from side to side. Sometimes things were so still that the fire scarcely moved. Once, I held my breath to see if my breathing was the only thing causing the light to flicker. It was not. I supposed, for it to be cold, there had to be a breeze coming from somewhere. I had searched with only my eyes for a long time when I first came here. I had crawled over the floor as far as the chains allowed to search for a vent, for anything really. I never found anything. It was only the candle and me in that room, and that was fine. I was even fine with the new shadows. I tried to be fine with everything, but that did not always work as I wished it would.

I was still staring at the candle minutes, possibly hours, later when it shook violently. The loud bang on the door was brief, but it was such that the fire nearly went out. It certainly startled me after so long in seclusion and absolute quiet. I thought about moving away from the door, but I changed my mind about that quickly when I noticed that was where the shadows had decided to gather. I stayed where I was and stared at the door, waiting for someone to pull it open. I flinched when I heard another bang, and this time the fire did disappear into smoke. I shivered and again laid my head on my knees.

There were no more noises on the other side of the door, so I allowed myself to relax and took a few breaths to slow my racing heart. Then I heard the door open, and I heard it close slowly and quietly. Someone else was here with me, which bothered me a little bit. I did not let it bother me any more than a bit.

If I was startled by the door's sound, then it was nothing compared to my shock when someone touched my hand. I did not pull my hand away, or recoil, or even lift my head, but I did catch my breath. I had not had contact with another person in such a terribly long time, that I was stunned to realize that someone, another person, was in the same room as I. The touch was brief, but it still made me . . . happy. I could not recall the last time I had felt happiness in my heart. It was also brief, my happiness, because I did not know who this person was. They could be there to take me someplace worse, if a thing like that existed. There was a strong possibility that whomever this was, they were not here to make friends.

I looked up when I noticed that the candle was flickering with fire again. There was a girl who looked to be my age, whatever that might be, sitting beside the wax stick. Her hair was frizzy and the color of honey. Her eyes were light green, almost yellow. She wore lots of earrings, and a light pink shirt that looked too large for her body. She smiled a small smile at me when she noticed I had lifted my head and she came closer.

From the pocket of her white pants, she removed a keychain with only a single rusted key hanging from it. She glanced at the door before inserting the key into the hole of my shackles. There was a quiet click, and the chains clattered to the floor. She did the same to the cuffs on my ankles and they too fell to the floor. Without the weight of metal keeping me down, I felt as if I could float away, but I did not move. The girl replaced the key and looked at me.

"Who are you?" I whispered, as a whisper was all I could force from my lips that were unaccustomed to speaking.

"My name is Amara. I'm here to help," she replied.

I rubbed my bloody and sore wrists. "How did you find me?"

"That doesn't matter right now." She stood and held out her hand. "Can you stand?"

I reached up to grab her hand but stopped midway. She blinked at me. "What's wrong?"

"My hand is bloody."

"Yeah. So?"

"Your hand will get bloody too."

She sighed. "Stop being such a saint and come on. We don't have time for this."

I took her hand, and she pulled me up with surprising strength. Honestly, I probably weighed less than her. I was certainly an unhealthy amount of thin. Anyway, I kept a hold of her hand until I felt steady. I let go and instantly crumpled to the hard floor. I crossed my legs and pushed my hair out of my eyes.

Amara looked disappointed. "Sorry," I breathed.

She crouched in front of me. "No, it's okay. I'm sorry for rushing you, but we need to leave if you want to get out of here safely. If you can't walk, then . . ." she sighed.

I offered my own smile. "Then go. You don't have to help me."

"I can't do that. If someone sees that you aren't chained, they won't be happy. They'll hurt you. And . . . I just can't."

"You have keys. Put them back on."

She furrowed her brows. "Why? Don't you want to leave?"

I crawled back to the wall and leaned against it. "Yes, of course, but I can't stand, and someone will get suspicious soon. Either both of us are caught," I took a breath and cleared my throat to keep whispering. "Or neither of us are caught. I don't want to be responsible for your capture. You can always come back if you want." I held my hands out to her. "Please, Amara." My shoulders shook with the strain of keeping my arms up. "I'll be okay."

She finally nodded and came over to me with the key already in her hand. She clamped the cuffs over my wrists and locked them, then did the same to my ankles. I will admit that I winced both times when the metal enclosed my skin once more, but she did not notice.

I pulled my legs close and leaned my head back against the wall with closed eyes. "Thank you," I whispered.

From somewhere near the door I heard her response. "What for?"

I knew her question was rhetorical, but I still had an answer for her. I do not believe she heard me say it, as I breathed it after I heard the door close, but I said it, nonetheless. "Company."

I told you earlier that I tried not to feel things too much, but when that door closed, I was disappointed. Not terribly, but enough that I wondered whether I would ever see another human being again. Seeing someone else was . . . I do not know. It is not possible to describe the ecstasy of seeing someone else after so long in

seclusion. Well, perhaps it would be possible, but not for someone who has gone without speaking for such a long time. I preferred not to dwell on things such as feelings for too long, as I did not dwell on most things for long.

I opened my eyes and stared at the candle in the center of the room because there was nothing else to do. If I had a book, I would have read it, but no one had ever offered me anything fun or even mildly interesting to do. If I had a bed, I would lie on it and cover myself with its warm blankets and lay my head on its soft pillow. No one had ever let me sleep in a bed though, and I had no comforting covers or pillows. I was alone in my room again, and I was cold as always. Thinking of warm things only made me shiver so I stopped thinking of them.

I thought of other things while I sat there and wondered whether Amara would come back, things like light and dark. Sure, the candle was bright and put off a little circle of light that surrounded its base, but it was hardly enough for me to see everything in the room. There were still the shadows that lurked beyond the light's reach and the darkness that stained the walls. Now I know I told you I would not lie or twist the truth, and I will not, but I will say that you might find what I am about to tell you a little insane. That is okay. In fact, I tell myself often that I am crazy for thinking it, but I think it regardless. I like to imagine that the light and dark of my room represent good and evil. There is more darkness because evil is overcoming the good in my room. The only good things in my room are the candle and its light, therefore it is not possible nor conceivable that the good of my room should be defeating evil. The shadows, the darkness, my chains, the flicker of the candle's flame, it is all evil. Yes, I sound a bit ludicrous saying that aloud, but I am only telling you what I believe. It is your choice to keep listening or to turn away and plug your ears. It is your choice whether you do or do not believe in the light of good and the dark of evil.

I actually once read a book written by someone called Luke that said this: "Therefore take heed that the light which is in you is not darkness." I have always held this short verse in my heart. I am not certain I understand it entirely, but I like to think that I have light in me and not darkness. Sometimes I wonder whether the light in me has been corrupted by darkness. Oh well. You may think me crazy for saying these things, and I am willing to admit that they might border on madness, but I beg you to keep listening. If no one listens to my story, then I have nothing to look forward to. I have nothing to keep

me occupied. If you leave, Dearest Listener, then what am I to do except sit in absolute stillness? Please, keep listening.

Thank you.

I stayed there by the wall for a long time, so long that I fell asleep. I did not have dreams, or if I did, I do not recall them. I never seem to remember my dreams. When I woke, the stub of a candle had been replaced with one that stood tall. That new candle was the first thing I noticed that was different since Amara had left. The second thing I noticed was the absence of the shadows that I had grown used to. I never thought I would miss darkness, but the room felt hollower and more hushed without them. Then I saw what I likely should have discerned the minute my eyes opened from rest. Huddled in the back of the room where I could see only their silhouettes were several people. I could not accurately tell how many people were standing there, as they were all shifting about, but there were at the very least four people. Two were the same height and might have been the same silhouette, except I saw the shape separate into two people. There was a tall person, another I thought to be close to my height, and that was all I could tell. There might have been a fifth shape between the shortest and middle in height, but I could not be sure with all the moving they did. I continued to watch them as they whispered to one another.

In case you were wondering how they got in there, I was told much later that it was Amara who let them all in the same way she had gotten in before. No need to wonder about it any longer. You are welcome, now listen.

After a time of them conversing and me silently watching them and wondering if it was me they spoke of, Amara emerged from the darkness and sat beside the candle. I am fairly positive that the others turned their heads to watch her and to watch me. Anyway, she smiled at me, and I nodded in recognition because I did not know what she wanted from me.

"You know, you never told me your name," she said.

I took a breath. "You never asked. It's Lucian, and it's nice to meet you, Amara."

"Likewise." She knelt beside me. "I know you can't stand, so I brought some others who can help you." She held up the key from earlier. "May I?"

I nodded. "Please."

She gave me a small smile and inserted the key into the holes of my iron bracelets and ankle shackles. The cuffs broke apart

instantly with a dull metal clank and clattered to the ground. I winced, afraid someone might have heard. No one came barging through the door, so I suppose I had nothing to worry about. I could not prevent myself from rubbing my sore wrists, which were blistered and raw with sores and dry blood in a ring. I leaned my head against the wall and closed my eyes.

Amara touched my shoulder. "Lucian, we really should get going. There's someone else we're going to get, and then we're leaving. I don't know what they want with us, and I don't intend to find out," she whispered.

"All right. Thank you, Amara." I arranged myself in a position that would be easy to stand up from and looked up at the girl as she stood. "What do you want me to do?"

"Hold on." She went back to the shifting human silhouettes and spoke in whispers with the tall person. She used her hands a lot while she spoke, making gestures that mostly seemed angry and frustrated. Then she nodded and turned on her heel, but now someone followed behind her. A tall boy with a shirt like mine and pants like mine: white sweatshirt and light gray jeans. His hair was dark blond and cut short. He had blue eyes that matched the sky. He was tall, and he looked indifferent to the entire situation. Amara gestured to him. "This is Nigel. He'll help you up and we can get out of here."

Nigel held out his hand. "Hello. I'm Lucian," I told him. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Looking back on it, it did feel a little silly. I took his hand after he said nothing and let him pull me to my feet. Nigel pulled my arm around his shoulders so that I would not fall. It did not work very well because he was so much taller than me. Instead, he put one hand behind my elbow and the other hand on my shoulder to keep me steady. I was doing most of the work, true, but Nigel made sure I did not collapse.

"Thanks, Nigel," I said. I found that I could nearly speak in my normal voice, but it was still unrefined and quieter than I would have liked.

"Whatever," was all I got in response.

Amara gave me a sympathetic look and then indicated for the remaining silhouettes to join us by the candle. There were three others that stepped out of the darkness. Two of them were boys who I would have mistaken as identical except for their eyes. One of them had the same blue eyes as Nigel, the other had green eyes that were the color of . . . Something I cannot remember. I am sure you know what I mean. There are lots of them, or there once were. They both

wore the same outfit as Nigel and I did. They were definitely twins, that much was clear, and they looked to be around ten. The other shadow I had seen was a girl a few years younger than me. Her dark hair was cut short and jagged, as though she had done it herself with a knife or sharp piece of glass. Rather than a shirt, she wore a simple white dress with buttons at the neck and long flowy sleeves. I noticed a few tears in her brown eyes as she walked toward us, but no one else seemed to think anything of it so I stayed quiet.

Amara introduced us. The boy with blue eyes was Cedric and the green-eyed boy was Andrew. They were twins, and Nigel's younger brothers. That made a lot of sense considering all three of them had the same wavy blond hair. The girl was called El. Amara said nothing else about her, which was fine. I did learn that she seemed nice though, which was more than I could say for Nigel.

"All right. We all know each other now, so we can get Daisy and leave," Amara said after the introductions. I lifted my hand, and she rolled her eyes. "This isn't school, Lucian. What do you want?"

I dropped my hand. "Sorry. Who is Daisy?"

"My little sister," El answered softly.

"Where is she?"

El answered again. "In room fifteen. I know the way from here."

"Okay. Lead the way," Amara said.

El nodded and went to the door, but she did not pull it open all the way. There was just enough space for her to stick her hand through the crack and do something. I did not really see what happened, but there was a brilliant light for a few seconds. I was still blinking away black spots as Nigel helped me through the door. We followed El and the others down a hallway made entirely of brown concrete. We passed rows of doors on either side of the hall, also made of concrete. Each door had a torch on either side and a different number carved into it. Mine had a three. El took us to door twelve before we turned a corner and there was another bright flash. As we rounded the corner, I glanced over my shoulder and noticed Andrew standing there with a raised hand, as though he were making dark shadows drift in the halls to conceal us. I reached out and took his wrist as Nigel pulled me farther into the concrete hallways.

We stopped at door fifteen and El let Amara use the rusted key to unlock it. One of the girls pulled open the door and we shuffled inside, Andrew shutting the door silently behind us. Immediately, I noticed the candle, and the small figure huddled by the wall with its knees pulled to its chin. I sucked in a breath and stumbled, but Nigel

caught me and steadied me. This was all horribly, nightmarishly familiar. It brought the fear back into my heart, the coldness into my bones. It was awful.

What made this worse, however, was that the little figure by the wall was a young girl. Her big brown eyes were not sad when she saw us, but happy. Her mouth turned up in a tiny smile. Her raven black hair was cut to her shoulders like El's. She wore a pretty little white dress with short sleeves. She must have been colder than I ever was.

El did not hesitate. The moment she saw her sister, she went to her with Amara's key and unlocked the chains. When the older girl was about to wrap Daisy in her arms, Daisy burst into tears and shook her head. El whispered to her but only got noes in response. I did not hear what they were talking about, but I was almost certain it had something to do with being held. I did not understand why the little girl could not walk on her own. Based on her only reddened wrists and clean clothes, she had not been here long. Whatever they were whispering about, Daisy was having no part of.

Cedric tried coaxing her in his small voice, Andrew with jokes, Amara with the same soothing words El used. None of it worked. Daisy wiped her tears away and kept shaking her head. I wondered whether any of them had asked her what was wrong. It was clear to me that she could speak, so surely she could say what she wanted. After a few more minutes with no progress, I pulled away from Nigel and stumbled to the others, falling to my knees as I arrived. I glanced at El and she shrugged, so I leaned against the wall beside Daisy.

I noticed, now that I was nearer, how exhausted she looked and how pale she was. I knew I was pale, not having seen the sun in a long time, but she was almost as pale as the dress she wore. Her eyes looked tired too. I sighed and offered a small smile. "What's wrong?"

Daisy looked up at me. "I'm cold and my hands hurt," she said.

I nodded. "My hands hurt too, but I'm not that cold anymore. Do you want to wear my sweatshirt?"

She furrowed her eyebrows. "Then what will you wear?"

"I have another shirt underneath. I'll be okay."

"Okay."

I pulled the shirt over my head and handed it to Daisy. She put it over her dress. On her thin frame, the shirt was as big as the dress. She wrapped her arms around herself and smiled at me. "Thank you."

"You're so welcome, Daisy."

"How come you know my name and I don't know yours?"

"My name is Lucian."

She coughed. "Will you carry me, Lucian?"

I sighed. "I can't. I need Nigel's help to walk, so I can't carry you because I can't stand up."

"Please? When we leave, El can hold me. Please, Lucian?"

I looked at the little girl's sister and found her grinning at me happily. Cedric and Andrew were standing with their brother while he spoke with Amara. I turned my attention back to Daisy and managed a tiny smile.

"Okay, but only until we're outside," I told her.

She nodded vigorously and rose to her knees. I stood up against the wall and leaned over to lift her, surprised at how light she was, or had become. She wrapped her arms around my shoulders and positioned herself on my hip. I was thankful that she mostly held herself up because my arms felt like sliding off and the strain on my wrists was unpleasant, but I did not mind. El was already standing beside me in case I needed to lean on her, but after a few steps, it was easy to stay upright. I went to the others with El and Daisy.

"Follow me," Amara said.

We followed her down the hallway and past the doors. I realized as we retraced our steps that there were no windows to be seen. I guess it made sense so no one outside the building would be able to see us inside, but it was unsettling despite the sense it sort of made. To me this entire building just seemed like a bunch of rooms stacked one atop another with short halls between every certain amount of rooms. I paused in front of my own door as the others passed it by, briefly wondering whether I would ever see the inside of it again. It seemed strange to be leaving something that I had grown used to seeing, used to living in, used to being held captive in for reasons beyond my understanding. I know it was ridiculous for me to feel that way toward a room which was there only to keep me hidden and chained, but there was a feeling of loss. I mean, where was I meant to go now? I did not know if I had parents, if I had brothers and sisters, if I even had someplace else to stay. I had been so ready to leave, to escape, that I had neglected to ask where it was we were going. And, in all honesty, I had not seen the outside for so long that I no longer knew what was out there.

Daisy shifted in my arms, and I turned away from the three on the door to see the others watching me curiously. I readjusted Daisy on my hip as we walked over to them. Nigel scowled and turned away, Andrew and Cedric smiled, El pursed her lips, Amara brushed

her hair from her face and turned away from me to lead us on. Daisy patted my shoulder comfortingly after I sighed and followed them down a long hall. I was glad they had not tried to make me feel better or claimed to know how I felt, though I did not allow the gladness to sink very deep into my heart. I could tell just by looking them over that I had been here for a much longer time than they had. None of their wrists were worse than reddened. None of their clothes were dirty from the concrete. None of them was as pale as I was, except Daisy. None of them had let themselves believe they would never escape. They had hope. That was how I knew, how I really knew, that they had only been here for a brief time. I had been here so long that to leave was almost not worth it. Staying where I knew what to expect nearly seemed a better idea than going somewhere that I had forgotten, but only almost.

A few more minutes of walking quietly and deliberately passed before we finally stood in front of the exit. It appeared to be an ordinary doorway, but without a door. I had to shut my eyes when I saw the light beaming through the exit because it felt as though the sun was burning my eyes from my sockets. A piercing, shocking pain. Someone grabbed my arm and pulled me outside, leading me through something soft and grainy that almost burned my bare feet. When I finally forced my eyes to open, I found that we were in a shaded area, leaning against the side of the building we had just left. I sighed in relief and wiped the tears from my eyes so I could see, then I turned to the little girl in my arms.

"I can't hold you much longer, Daisy. Where's your sister?" I asked.

She looked around and pointed. "Over there with everyone else."

I walked across the sand and tapped El's shoulder to get her attention. She looked up at me and seemed to understand. "Come here, Daisy."

She held out her arms for the girl and I gladly lowered Daisy into her sister's embrace. El kissed the top of Daisy's head and held her near while I pulled my arms away and took a step back. Then I took in my surroundings. There was sand that stretched as far as the eye could see, an expanse of pure blue sky, and little buildings scattered across the desert. I turned to look behind me and saw the massive structure which I had been in only seconds earlier. It was a huge cube of brown concrete made of smaller cubes, which I figured were the numbered rooms.

I shivered despite the warmth and felt suddenly dizzy. I put out

a hand, hoping to lean against the building, but found that I was too far away to reach. I fell forward and caught myself with my hands. The sand below me spun and when I looked back at the cubular building, I saw a boy with brown hair and blue eyes being carried away. He fought against them, but he was miserably failing. He did not look much younger than me, and he looked frightened.

"Please, stop! You need to stop! I don't know what you're talking about! Let me go. Please."

The two men that held him touched his head and there was a darkness that covered him. He screamed briefly. When I could see him again, he slumped unconsciously. As I watched him being carried into the large building, I noticed someone in the background. I think it was a young woman, but she was too far away to be sure. I saw her lift a hand to her face. She was wiping away tears. I blinked as she turned to walk away, and everything refocused. The sand was normal again, everyone was there with me, helping me up, and there was no boy. I blinked again and tore my gaze from the building of rooms and chains. I focused instead on the confused looks everyone had.

Nigel was holding me up, something I was not certain I would be able to do on my own. The girls all looked worried and anxious, Cedric and Andrew were just looking at me with strange expressions. It almost seemed like I had done something wrong, which I very well could have.

"I apologize. I didn't mean for that to happen. I'm sorry," I said.

Cedric gave me a little smile. "That's okay. It probably wasn't really your fault. You just fell." His voice was soft and strangely kind for such a young boy.

"Thank you."

El hoisted Daisy up on her hip and turned away, bringing the twins with her. Nigel and Amara, however, did not leave my side. Nigel let go of me, while Amara stared at nothing, and no one said anything. It was likely the most awkward moment of my life, the desert silence. I looked from Nigel to Amara, and back again, wondering when one of them would accuse me of . . . Well, I was not entirely sure what of, but I was sure it would be something.

"Sit down, Lucian," Amara said.

"Why?" I asked.

"I have a lot of explaining to do. Trust me, you should sit down."

I nodded and sat down in a shaded area with crossed legs.

"Okay. Am I allowed to ask a question?"

"Sure."

"Why did you help me escape? I mean, the others I understand. You obviously all know one another and probably have for a long time, but I'm a stranger. I . . . I don't even know . . ." I shook my head and decided not to finish that sentence.

She nodded after sharing a glance with Nigel. "I know it all seems crazy and strange, but you just need to listen."

"All right. I'm listening."

She sat down opposite me and pushed the hair from her eyes before she began. "A few months ago," she paused. "Wait. How much do you already know?"

"About what?"

Amara pursed her lips. "Do you know what Desolara is, or why it's like this?"

"I do not."

"Nigel, you know it better than I do," she said to the tall boy.

Nigel grumbled under his breath but sat down with us anyway. "To understand anything, you first have to understand that there is magic in the world."

"When you say magic, do you mean magic?" I asked.

"No. I mean dirt," he grumbled. "Are you really that dull?"

"Sorry."

"There are two kinds of magic. In their simpler forms, they are called light and dark, but few people actually call them that anymore. Light magic is Blessings; dark magic is Obscurities. With Blessings, you can do things like heal people, temporarily blind people, make fires, create heat. Obscurities are for things like bringing darkness, making shadows seem darker than they are, enveloping light, creating coldness. Those are only a few things you can do with magic."

I nodded. "When El cracked open the door and stuck her hand out, she was using magic on the guards, right?"

"Yes," Amara said. "El, Cedric, Nigel, and I have Blessings. Daisy and Andrew have Obscurities, though Daisy doesn't know how to use her magic."

"Then what magic do I have?"

"I'm not sure. I thought you would know."

"Oh."

"May I continue now?" Nigel asked. I shrugged. "All right. At the beginning of time, there was a powerful man. He had the ability of both Blessings and Obscurities, one of only two known humans to have been born with both. We call them the Obscure Blessings."

Anyway, he used Blessings to make the sun blazing hot and to fill the sand with its heat. He spread the hot sand across every inch of Desolara, covering some asylums entirely. He called the dunes the Expanse. Then with Obscurities, he made the night freezing cold, and he created the moon and the stars to mark nighttime. A time after that, only a mere three years ago, the second Obscure Blessing came across a clear area in Desolara. He used his magic to raise the Cage from the sand, and he still lives there with his specially trained guards."

"I have a question," I said.

Amara shrugged. "What?"

"What are asylums?"

"The buildings people live in."

"What's the Cage?"

"That," she pointed toward the massive brown building, "is the Cage, Lucian."

"Now, a few months ago from today," Nigel continued, "a man came to our asylum. He looked like any other man; except he wore all black rather than a light color. Cedric and Andrew were playing in their room, Amara was reading on her chair, and I was standing with my parents at the door. Mother and Father were having—"

"Amara is your sister?" I interrupted.

"Shut up, Lucian," he said. "Mother and Father were having a friendly conversation with the man, nothing unusual, when Cedric shrieked. Amara dropped her book and ran into their room. I followed after her, but they were gone when I got there. I remember feeling cold and I couldn't see. The next thing I knew, I was in the Cage."

Amara sighed. "That isn't everything. As we were being carried to the Cage, I remember a woman. She was walking beside me, like she was going to go in the Cage too, but she didn't. She whispered something to me. She said, "Please, room three." She sounded desperate. The moment I was given a way out of my own room, I found the door marked with a three and I went inside. I saw you, Lucian, and I couldn't just leave you there after what she said."

"You know El and Daisy then?"

"Yes. We're cousins. Their parents recently passed away from terra fever. They've been staying in the empty house ever since," Amara paused and looked at me. "What happened earlier, Lucian?" I heard Amara ask.

I turned toward her and sighed. "I'm not really sure. I think it was a memory."

She squinted at me. "A memory? How long have you been here?"

"I don't know."

"Do you have parents?"

"I don't know."

"Okay. What do you know?"

"Everything you just told me and my name."

"That's it?"

"I'm sorry," I said.

She shook her head and stood up with her brother. "We should get going."

I watched them walk over to the others and gather them up. Andrew and Cedric held each of Amara's hands, El held Daisy, and Nigel stood behind them all with a scowl. I stood up and watched them for a moment, thinking about that boy who had been carried into the Cage. I remembered the woman who wiped away a tear, and the two men dressed in black clothes with cloth wrapped around their heads, noses, and mouths. It was strange to remember something that seemed like it had happened a long time ago yet felt burned into my heart as though it happened only yesterday. It was odd to be told about all those strange things, like magic, but feel as though I already knew everything I had been told. My heart told me I knew it all, but my mind hid the truth from me. It was rather confusing.

As I watched them begin to walk away, a part of me wondered if they would notice my absence. I wondered if they would care whether I left, or if they would shrug their shoulders and keep going. I did not walk toward them, but instead continued to watch them and wondered about my own family. Did I have brothers or sisters? Were my parents still alive? Did that woman I had seen care about me? I ran my fingers through my hair and exhaled a long breath. I closed my eyes briefly, and then I felt a hand in my own. I looked down and saw El with her sister on her hip, both smiling brightly.

"Amara isn't very patient, Lucian," the older girl said to me.

I smiled. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

El raised a brow and then laughed lightly. "Come on. We should go before it gets too dark. The asylum isn't far."

I nodded and let her walk with me toward the others. The feeling of her warm, small hand in my own made me happy. It made me feel like I was part of something, and not someone to be forgotten in room three. I let the happiness stay in my heart this time because I realized it was better than fear.

We eventually caught up with the others and we all walked together. Andrew played games and told jokes to make Cedric laugh his quiet laugh. El stayed by my side and sometimes whispered things to Daisy. Other times she disappeared for a few moments with her little sister and then came back as though nothing strange had happened. Amara and Nigel stayed in front of us and led the way. Sometimes I caught glimpses of them arguing or ignoring one another. They mostly stayed silent, which was likely better for everyone.

I do not think I did a fantastic job of hiding my exhaustion from any of the others. Even Daisy still had her small smile plastered on her face. I dragged my feet through the sand, I stumbled, I was bone tired. Everything felt heavy, like my own body might collapse at any second and lay there on the sand for days. I had not walked this far for ages, and my legs were unaccustomed to such movement. I saw shadowy figures dance out of sight in my peripheral vision several times, but never said anything. I thought they might be hallucinations.

I was hugely relieved when the sun began to sink behind the Expanse. Amara said we could stop for the night, and I crumpled to the ground. I rolled to my back and shivered in my thin shirt. I noticed Cedric rub his hands together and press them against the cold sand, sending brief waves of heat through the grains. I sat up and we gathered near to one another in a semicircle, El relieving herself by sitting Daisy down between the two of us. There was a long silence that I found uncomfortable, but that no one was willing to break. I would have, except I did not know what to say.

"I think we'll be there in the afternoon. We don't live far from the Cage, but hopefully we'll be safe there and they won't find us."

"That's good," Cedric said.

"Yep. Let's get some rest."

I laid down with everyone else and stared at the night sky full of sparkling stars. They were beautiful, and they made Desolara look beautiful despite its sandiness. It also made the world much colder than I had anticipated and I was shivering more than I would have liked, but I was unwilling to ask for my sweatshirt from Daisy. She could keep it forever if it would bring her warmth. I pulled myself into a tight ball and lay there in the sand, listening to El and Daisy breathe rhythmically in their sleep.

I laid on the desert ground for hours, rubbing my bare arms, without any rest. I kept imagining myself still in the room with

chains that prevented me from moving. It had been cold there, and it was equally as cold outside. I finally just sat up and scooted a short distance from everyone, holding my knees close as I had in the Cage. I thought over everything Nigel and Amara had told me, and I began to wonder if I could use magic. I crossed my legs and rubbed my hands together, like Cedric had. For a fleeting moment, I felt heat and thought I was doing it, but realized it was from the friction of rubbing them against one another. Then I really did begin to feel warmth emanating from my hands. I glanced down and noticed the slight white glow my hands had taken on, though it did not scare me or startle me. It felt familiar, like I had done this many times before. It felt natural and I knew what to do without having to think about it. I placed my palms against my chest and the warmth from them filled my body. I thought it would be brief and fade away because Cedric's had, but my magic stayed inside me and kept me warm. I somehow knew this was because I had been taught to use Blessings at an early age, and I had also been taught Obscurities. I closed my eyes, and I saw a young man with brown hair like mine and pale blue eyes. He was smiling at a young boy who sat in the grass with his legs crossed. I realized it was the same boy who had been carried into the Cage, only he was much younger.

"That's great! Now let's try something else. You can make warmth, so let's practice making coldness," the man said.

The boy nodded excitedly. "Okay, Daddy. How do I do that?"

The man held his hands a few inches apart, both facing upward. "To make warmth, you keep your hands close. To make coldness, you must not allow your hands to touch, or else it will only make heat. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. I understand." The boy held his hands the same way his father held his own.

"Good. All you have to do is focus not on making yourself warm, but on making yourself cold. Bringing on a small shiver."

The father closed his eyes and only a few short seconds later, his hand shone with a dark glow. He touched one hand to his chest and shivered. Then he brought his other hand over the hand on his chest, and they both changed to glow a soft white. The boy smiled and copied exactly what his father had done. He shivered, then he was warm. He did it again and again, until his father told him to stop.

The man rose to his feet and pulled up his son. "That's enough for today. You did an excellent job. Run along inside and see to your mother."

"Yes, Daddy. Thank you."

"Always, my boy."

I rubbed my eyes and the vision faded away. I pulled my hands from my chest and held them apart, like the boy and his father. I thought of the room, how cold I had always been, the shivers that ran up and down my spine. My hands shone instantly with the dark glow. I touched a hand to my chest, and the coldness I felt was shocking. I shivered and had to clench my teeth to keep them from chattering. I shakily placed my other hand over the hand on my chest, and they both glowed with the same soft white as before. Heat replaced the coldness, and I relaxed. I moved my hands from my chest to hold my knees close, and I rested my chin on them. I noticed that the warmth stayed with me.

I was staring at the sleeping bodies in front of me, and I noticed that most of them shivered in their sleep. I crawled near Daisy and El and placed a hand on each of their backs. I immediately saw them relax and they released sighs. I went over to the twins and did the same, giving them warmth for the chilly night. I could not reach Amara and Nigel at the same time because Nigel was asleep away from everyone else. I touched a hand to Amara's back and gave her warmth, then I went over to where Nigel lay. He did not seem particularly cold, but I put my hand on his back and gave him warmth anyway. Then I went back to my own spot on the ground and lay there quietly, shaking whatever remained of the Blessings from my hands lest I accidentally cause a desert fire.

It was a long time before I fell asleep on that first night. I thought if I counted the clouds which lackadaisically drifted by that I might grow tired of it and fall asleep, but that did not work. I tried another tactic: Thinking of the asylum we would get to tomorrow afternoon. I imagined it looked like every other asylum we passed, which meant it would be made of brown concrete or wood. The roof would be lots of little wooden squares. The windows would be warped and murky. The door would be flimsy and nearly broken off its hinges. There would likely be sand inside, enough that it was noticeable. It would also be small. I had yet to see an asylum that was not a twenty by thirty rectangle. They all had the same drab colors, they were all in the same dilapidated state, and all of them were sandy. Not a single one of them was a sight for sore eyes, which I found both intriguing and depressing. There would sometimes be a house entirely covered with sand, and that was at least something different, but those seemed to be rare. It was all akin, to say the

least.

If you must know, it was not until I had a short memory that I fell comfortably asleep at last. It began with *the dark-haired woman I had seen before. She was in bed and there was a small boy beside her on the bed's edge. In his little hands, there rested a small sphere of light that he held up to her. No words passed between them as she took the warm globe in both hands and brought it to her mouth. The young boy watched the glow slide down her throat and then it was gone, and she sighed as her eyes gently closed and the boy laid her head on the pillow, both his palms giving off a dark, cooling glow. As he turned to leave the room, the vision blurred, and I slipped into a much-needed slumber.*

I woke to a shriek. The terrible sound caused me to sit up and open my eyes in an instant. The day was early, as I could only just see the rising sun, but everyone else was awake now as well. It took me a moment to realize that Andrew was the one who I had heard. Everyone surrounded him, except Daisy who was still asleep. I went over to them and crouched in front of the boy, wondering what had caused his sudden distress.

"Andrew, you only had a dream. It's all right. We'll be home soon, and everything will go back to the way it was before. I promise," Amara was saying.

Her little brother shook his head. "It wasn't a dream, it wasn't a dream, Amara. It wasn't a dream."

Amara put her hands on his shoulders. "Everyone is fine, Andrew. We're all okay."

"No. It was here, they were here."

Nigel rolled his eyes and set Andrew on his feet. "You're fine, we're all fine, let's go."

Amara stood up and crossed her arms. "He's upset, Nigel. Have some sympathy for once, will you?"

"He had a bad dream, that's all. We could already be there by now," he argued.

Amara said something else that I did not care to hear. As they were both acting like idiots, I took it upon myself to comfort Andrew. I gently took his arm and led him a short distance from his older siblings, where El stood. I got on my knees to be close to the same height as him, and I noticed that he was crying now. There was something else in his eyes too, a sort of vacancy. As though there was something that should have been there but no longer was.

"Andrew, what happened?" I asked gently.

He blinked at me, and more tears fell. "Cedric . . ." was all he said, which was more than enough.

El gasped and put a hand to her mouth. Amara and Nigel finally closed their mouths and spun around. I took a breath and sat Andrew down beside Daisy, then I went to El. "Will you stay here with them while we look for Cedric? He can't have gone far, and they shouldn't be alone. Please?"

Her shoulders fell, but she nodded and smiled faintly. "Yes, of course. Don't get lost."

I nodded and went to where Amara and her brother were standing. "We should spread out and look for him, guys. It will be quicker that way." I held one hand palm up and used my other hand to snap just over my palm. A small flame shone on my skin, and it tingled, but it did not burn me. "You should probably use your Blessings for a light source. I'll explain later."

I spun on my heel and ran away from them, calling Cedric's name. I glanced over my shoulder as I went and saw with relief that his brother and sister were looking for him as well. I ran until my legs would no longer carry me at such a speed and slowed to a jog. I held my hand in front of me to light my way. I only saw sand, asylums, and the Expanse. Cedric answered none of my calls, which worried me. If the others found him, I figured they would call me back or come get me. I sighed and blew away the fire when I noticed the sun peering above the Expanse. It provided ample light to see now, and I continued on my way.

After a long time of jogging, I stumbled and had to walk. I cleared my throat and called Cedric again, but like before I heard nothing in response. As the sun rose, I became aware of its heat and blinding light. I brought a hand to my forehead to block the beams, and an idea came to me. I thought of a slight breeze and a small shiver and brought my hand to my chest. The difference in temperature was immediate. I cooled off and felt pleasantly chilly, but the light was still a problem. I paused and held my arms out in front of me, remembering the shadows that had been in my room with me. I recalled the way they whispered. My hands produced a dark, misty coil that took the shape of a shadow. The Obscurities from both hands combined into a single shadow that hovered before me. I dropped my hands to my sides and fell to my knees. I wanted to convince myself this was because I was in a desert and had been running, exerting myself. It could have been because I was exhausted and had not gotten enough sleep. Those would have been lies. I knew

the reason I felt shaky and weak was because of the magic I had used. Something in my heart told me that if I used too much of it in such quick succession it would kill me. My heart would stop, and I would die. I remember someone telling me that a long time ago. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath to rise unsteadily to my feet.

When I faced the shadow I had made, it was not looking at me. Its head was turned to the side, staring at something far off. I noticed that it shaded me from the sun without being near me, which seemed odd, though I suppose magic was odd. I watched as it lifted a shifty arm and pointed in a direction. I followed its gaze and sucked in a breath. Not terribly far from me were two men bathed in shadow. They were dressed in all black. I squinted and saw what my own shadow wanted me to see. Cedric was between them, being dragged across the sand like a ragdoll. I went after them with the help of my shadow which I had decided to call a shade. It easily lifted me off the ground and hovered toward the men.

When we were only feet away, the shade set me down and I knelt in the sand. I pushed my hands beneath Desolara's surface and rubbed them together. A shocking wave of heat traveled across the grains and directly to each of the men. I saw them stumble and fall, hopping from foot to foot. Cedric collapsed to the ground. I gave my shade a nod and it went to retrieve the boy. I stood up and blew on each of my hands, then I watched as black-tinted ice formed over the legs of the men, effectively preventing them from moving an inch. I went closer to them and raised a single hand toward the shades. They recoiled from the light and vanished, except mine. I turned on the horrified men.

"Who are you?" one of them asked.

I touched a finger to each of their temples and they fainted. "I don't know," I answered quietly.

I shook my hands to rid them of any remaining magic and stumbled to where my shade was hunched over Cedric, blocking him from the sun. I waved the shade away and it placed Cedric on the ground gently before vanishing. I did not know how much qualified as too much magic, but I figured it was more than I had used thus far. I thought of the warmth of healing and my finger shone with that soft white glow. I touched the boy's forehead and let the magic go into his heart and his mind, then I dropped to my knees. I tried to recall something that might tell me what too much magic meant, but I could remember nothing. I could not even recall when I had been taught all the things I had just done. I did them because it felt right

and I knew, somehow, exactly what I was doing and what to do and how to do it. Perhaps, then, I also knew when I should stop using magic. Or maybe I had never learned that. Either way, I sat on my knees until Cedric sat up and opened his eyes.

I pushed my fingers through my hair and smiled at him. "How are you, Cedric?" I asked.

He rubbed his eyes and pushed the golden waves from his eyes. "I . . . Fine." He looked at me. "Where is everyone else?"

"They're looking for you. Except Andrew, El, and Daisy."

"Okay. Let's go." He stood up and looked expectantly at me.

I pulled my knees out from under me and crossed my legs. "Cedric, hold on. Are you sure you're all right? Do you know what happened?"

He closed his eyes as he sat down in front of me. He did not meet my gaze as he spoke. "I was asleep beside Andrew. I had been cold all night, and I finally got warm and was able to relax and sleep. Then I had a nightmare. I always have nightmares. It woke me up and I realized I was being carried away, but I couldn't escape. They were going to take me back to the Cage, Lucian. I heard someone call my name, and shouted, but then everything turned black, and I can only remember waking up to see you after that." He brushed away a tear and then looked at me. "Can we go now?" he asked.

The sun was almost entirely visible above the Expanse. The others would be wondering where we were by now, as I was fairly positive Amara and Nigel would have returned. I sighed and nodded, watching him stand up and spin around in confusion. I pushed myself to my feet, but the movement made me feel ill and I nearly toppled over. I managed to straighten myself and stagger over before Cedric noticed.

"Lucian, do you know where to go?" he asked softly.

"I do not," I replied just as softly.

"Fabulous. We're lost." He turned to me. "You could have done something to mark where you came from. You didn't have to come and find me and get us both lost."

"I was only trying to find you. I didn't think of that while calling you, Cedric. I'm sorry."

"Yeah? Well, I'm sorry it was you and not my sister that came!"

He shook his head at me and ran away behind the dunes so that I could not see him. I did not think I would be able to chase after him this time, but I had to do something. I followed his footprints, walking slowly and steadily. It took me much longer to get to him

the second time than it had the first time. I was not feeling well, and by the time I found him perched behind a dune, I thought I was going to pass out. I took a deep breath and went to sit beside him. His head was in his hands, and he was crying. I leaned against the sand and waited until he was calm enough to speak.

"Lucian, I'm sorry. I know I only got us more lost by running from you. I'm sorry. We would already be home by now if I hadn't run away. It's almost noon, Lucian. I'm really sorry," he whispered.

"It's okay, Cedric. Look over there." I pointed in front of us. If you looked very closely you could make out four moving figures, and a still figure. He had run toward the others. "You went in the proper direction after all. You're better at this than I am."

He wiped the tears and sand from his face and smiled at me. "Thank you for coming to get me, Lucian."

"Always," I muttered.

He jumped to his feet and waited until I was standing as well. I stumbled and would have fallen if Cedric had not rushed over to help me. I placed my hand against the sand, which thankfully was hard enough that my hand did not sink into it, and was able to keep myself up for the boy's benefit. "Lucian?"

"I'll be right behind you."

He scrunched his eyebrows. "Are you sure?"

"Positive."

He turned around slowly and began walking toward everyone else. I took a moment to steady myself and followed slowly behind him. He kept glancing over his shoulder to see if I was still coming and I smiled reassuringly each time. My feet began to drag in the sand, and I wondered how long it would be until I collapsed and had to crawl the rest of the way. As it turned out, we were only a few yards away when I dropped to all fours. Cedric glanced back a short time after my fall and ran to my aid. He helped me stand up and I found myself leaning on him for support.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I'll tell you when we get there." I blinked a few times. "You don't have to do this, Cedric. Nigel can come."

He shook his head and we walked nearer and nearer to everyone. "Nigel doesn't want to help anyone. I can do it."

It took us a few more minutes to reach them and they all hugged Cedric and made sure nothing was wrong with him, checked that nothing was missing. Andrew grinned from ear to ear and embraced his brother. Nigel stood in the background, rolling his eyes,

but I saw the relief in his expression when he saw his little brother. It took them a few moments to realize that rather than me holding up the boy, he was holding me up.

El took my arm and sat me down near the hot ashes, but I scooted back because I was already plenty hot. Amara, who held Daisy, and the twins asked in a million separate ways what was wrong. I did not answer them, but turned to Andrew and beckoned him closer. He sat down in front of me and shared a glance with his brother.

"I need you to do something for me," I said. He nodded. "Hold out your hands with the palms up." He did as I asked. "Good. Now I need you to think of cold things, think of shivers. Nothing too drastic. Can you do that?" Andrew shut his eyes. "You have to focus on your Obscurities, Andrew." I paused and watched his hands take on the faint black glow that always accompanied dark magic. "You're doing great. Now press both hands against my back."

Andrew walked behind where I sat and put each of his hands on either side of my spine. I felt the chill go inside me and I raised a shaky hand to wipe the sweat from my forehead. I asked him to stop after a minute and the coolness stayed with me for a fleeting time after his hands left. I turned to him and thanked him. I still felt awful and weak, but I no longer felt overheated and ready to melt on the spot.

Amara had been intrigued throughout the magic lesson, but now she set Daisy beside El and crossed her arms. Her green glare was a lot like Andrew's gaze. "What happened? You went to get Cedric, and instead came back unable to stand. I'm glad Cedric is okay, and I thank you for bringing him here, but you have some explaining to do, Luciano."

I laughed lightly. "My name isn't Luciano, it's just Lucian."

"Regardless, I need you to tell me what happened."

"Why are you so interested?" I wondered. I did not ask it in any way, I only wanted to know why it mattered to her so much.

"My brother was involved and if he is hurt because you couldn't protect him, I'll never forgive you."

I held up my hands in surrender. "I'm sorry."

She sighed and sat down. "Quit apologizing for everything and please just tell me what happened."

"When I saw him, he was being carried away by those men in black. He was unconscious at the time. There were shades with the men as well. I—"

"What are shades?" Daisy interrupted.

"That's what I call the shadows that were with the men. Anyway, I used magic to stop them and get rid of the shades and make Cedric wake up. Then we came here and that's it."

"Okay, would you like to explain what Andrew did just now and tell us whether you have Blessings or Obscurities?" Amara inquired.

I closed my eyes briefly. "All Andrew did was cool me off, though his magic isn't strong enough to last without his touch. And—"

Before I could finish, El interrupted. "Then you have Blessings, else you could have done that yourself."

"Yes, but I also have Obscurities," I said quietly.

There were simultaneous intakes of breath from everyone, including Nigel. "I couldn't use either kind of magic because I used too much of it already to help Cedric. If I had used anymore in such close succession, it would have killed me." They all gasped again. "I feel horrible, and I have a headache. I apologize, but I'm not answering any more questions right now. What I would really love is a moment of rest, if that's possible."

I was about to lay down when I felt someone tap my arm. I sighed and opened my eyes to see that Amara was the only person who had not scooted away from me. Her green eyes were worried, I noticed that much. And her tone was soft when she spoke. "Lucian, there have only been two Obscure Blessings in existence and only one of them is still alive. One of them died, one of them is alive, and apparently a third one is his son."

"I have a father?" I whispered thoughtlessly.

She shook her head at me. "How long did it take you to figure that out?" The sarcasm was thick.

"I didn't mean it like that. I thought since I didn't really remember them that they were dead. Or something."

"Whatever. The point is, you're the son of the man who had us all captured. I'm not really sure what he wanted with us, but I know it can't be anything good." She pursed her lips. "I'm not sure what to think about you, Lucian."

I furrowed my brows. "What does that mean?"

"You're his son."

"And that automatically makes me a terrible person? You think the whole room three thing was our maniacal plan?" She shrugged in response to that. I had not really allowed myself to feel when I was in the room, as you may recall, but when all she did was shrug . . . Well, it hurt. I could not believe that they would distance themselves

from me because of who they thought my father was. I could not be sure that this man *was* my father. He had imprisoned me too, after all. I lay down on the sand and closed my eyes. "Do you honestly believe that I would ever hurt any of you, Amara? I brought Cedric back because of you and Andrew and, yes, even Nigel."

"I know . . . but . . . Never mind."

"Okay. I can't be trusted. You're welcome to leave me here. Go home and be safe. I'll find somewhere else to stay or . . . I'll go back to the Cage." I smiled briefly and tiredly at her. "You don't have to stay, Amara. I won't come if you think I'm dangerous, I promise."

"I'm sorry. You're welcome to come, but we can't wait for you to get well and rest. We aren't waiting around for Daisy to get better." She stood up and spun on her heel.

I pushed myself up on an elbow. "Wait. What's wrong with Daisy?" I asked.

Amara paused. "She has terra fever and there's no cure. She's going to die any day now."

All those trips behind sand dunes made sense all of a sudden. El had probably taken her sister to be sick. The paleness, her occasional coughs, the weakness in her legs. All of it made a sickening amount of sense. The few memories I had experienced came back to me and I recalled the orb of Blessings that the boy's mother had swallowed.

"I can heal her," I said.

Amara turned around and stared at me, paying no attention to the others who had begun to walk away. "That isn't possible," she breathed. "There's no cure. Scientists have tried everything, even magic. It can't be done."

"Yes, well, there is still one thing they haven't done."

"What's that?"

"Both kinds of magic. Obscurities and Blessings."

She sighed. "Are you positive it will work?"

"Uh . . . No, but I'm pretty sure."

"If you're not positive, then it isn't worth it." She looked away again. "Are you coming or not?"

I slowly pushed myself to my feet, but my legs felt wobbly, and they collapsed beneath me. I rolled to my back and crossed my arms over my chest, resigned to the fact that I would be entirely alone when she left. "I cannot come with you. I need to rest."

"Fine. I hope you can find somewhere to stay."

"Thanks."

"Bye, Lucian."

She was too far away to hear me whisper goodbye, but I did anyway. "Bye, Amara, and be safe."

I stayed in the sand, my eyes closed against the rising sun and my arms laid lazily over my chest. As I lay there, I worried that someone might come and take me back to the Cage. I discarded that thought with the thought of rest and someplace to stay. I had never imagined, in all my time in the room, that I could truly leave and live my life. I had sunken into the despairing idea that my entire future would be in that room. I would become a frail old man and then they would bury me under the brown concrete of room three. In the back of my mind, that image always floated around, but now I had something else to look forward to. I could look forward to a safe place, a bed, food, water. I ate and drank in the Cage, but it hardly seemed adequate for a walk in the desert. I knew that without food and water, I could die in the Expanse. Death, however, was something I had long been resigned to.

I drifted off for a while, dreaming of things long passed. I dreamed of the boy and the woman in bed again. Of the boy being carried away, but then something else appeared in my head. *There was the boy again, slumped between the two men in black. They dragged him down a long hallway and knocked on a door marked with a zero. There was a commanding voice on the other side of the door, a man's voice, which said "Come in." The men entered with the unconscious boy and stood erect before the man. He had tan skin that came from years spent in the sun and a hard blue gaze. The clothes he wore were black like the men's, except he wore the dark cloth over his nose and mouth as well. His dark hair had hints of silver mixed in with the brown, and he wore a beard that was more silvery than his hair. Perhaps in your head you imagine this man as tall and strong, and if you do, then you're picturing the wrong man. This man was tall, yes, but he was thin and appeared frail. That is how you must see him in your head.*

"Sir, what are your orders?" the man on the right asked.

The man's eyes crinkled with a hidden smile. "I will take care of him myself. I want the two of you to release everyone, except the man in room one. And keep room two secure," he said, his eyes still on the boy.

"But, sir, they can be trained," the man on the left said.

"Fine. Release those without the proper magic and keep the others. Train them." He rose from his chair. "Prepare room three."

"Yes, sir."

The two men nonchalantly let the boy fall to the floor as they left the room. The man cursed under his breath and lifted the small child into his arms. The two of them were remarkably similar, with the deep brown waves and the blue eyes that nearly matched. The boy was much smaller than the man, despite being around twelve, and his skin was rather pale, but the differences stopped there. The man lifted the boy into his arms and stood up. His brown leather boots muffled his footsteps as the two of them went down the long hall. They passed no one and nothing except the brown concrete that was everywhere. When they were at the end of the hall, the man made a left and walked down a shorter hall, then turned right. There was a door that had a three etched deep into its concrete. The man from earlier must have finished because he was nowhere to be seen. The man turned the doorknob and carried the child inside. There was a lit candle in the center of the room and shackles on the far wall.

The man knelt beside the shackles and gently leaned the boy against the wall. He closed the cuffs around the child's pale wrists and clamped the others shut at his ankles. Then he raised a trembling hand to his son's cheek and held it there, caressing the child. He rose to his full height. He went to the door but paused as though about to speak. He stood still and quiet for a time, then he whispered these words:

"Goodbye, Lucian."

"Father?" the boy breathed.

I rubbed my eyes and sat up, wiping the sweat from my forehead and eyes. Then I realized what I had dreamed. Amara had been exactly right about my father. The man who had imprisoned us, who had created the Cage, was my father. He was the man who had taught me everything I know about magic, everything I would need to know to control Blessings and Obscurities. That man who had sat in the grass with the little boy, that was the man who had raised me. Then he had sent his own men to take me away and he had put those chains over my wrists with his own hands. I was, in a word, revulsed. I simply could not fathom that the man who had raised me would do something like that. It broke my heart.

I ran my fingers through my hair and sighed heavily. I glanced at the sky and saw that the sun was much higher in the sky than it had been when I fell asleep. It was already past noon, which meant I needed to get going. As I was feeling much better, I thought of cold things and placed my hand over my chest so I would not be as hot. I did not make a shade to keep the sun away, but instead got to my

feet and started walking into the Expanse.

I ran for a good amount of time, then resigned myself to jogging. I thought there was a small possibility that I might catch up with them if they were only walking and I was running or jogging. It was night by the time I had to walk, and my face was burning. I do not recommend sleeping under the blazing sun for hours. It was not long after the sun set that I was using Blessings to fill myself with warmth. I had decided to keep going through the night and stop in the morning, but my legs and feet began to ache. I found a large dune and sat against it, praying that no one would notice me there. Perhaps exhaustion should have caused me to fall asleep quickly, but that is not at all what happened. I hardly had any sleep that night, to tell you the truth. There were too many things that wandered in my head and begged me for attention. The most annoying were all the things about my father. The questions, the questions, and the other questions that crowded the front of my mind and would not allow me a moment of peace.

I lay there for pointless hours, thinking. In my memory of him giving me lessons, he had seemed like a decent man. He encouraged me and was patient with me. He apparently had shown me how to care for Mother by way of magic, which meant he cared about her too. What, then, had possessed him to do make the Cage? To put chains around his own child's wrists? I could not understand it at that time. It bothered me that I could not remember anything more than the short vision I had seen. It bothered me that I could not recall my mother, or our home, or all of us together. Why were my only memories the ones where I antagonized my father?

A sudden sound shook me from my wonderings. I closed my eyes and listened harder, this time hearing quiet voices. I did not know what that meant and I was not keen on finding out. I stood up and began to walk away, but the moment I took one step, the shadows gathered around me in a circle. I glanced at them and then sat down in the sand with crossed legs, waiting for whomever controlled them to come into the enclosed space. When he did come, he wore black cloth over his nose and mouth and around his head. The tanned skin around his eyes was the only visible skin. He wore black shoes, a black outfit, black gloves. At his waist was a black sheath which I supposed held a dagger. He sat himself down in my position and looked me directly in the eye. I recognized him instantly, and a sudden wave of dizziness rolled over me. I put a hand down to steady myself, but the memory came regardless of my efforts to prevent it.

I, a few years younger, was listening to my mother and father argue about something. I was outside the asylum, peering through a broken window and curiously eavesdropping. They were both seated in old, browned chairs across from one another.

"You aren't listening, Dee."

"I have heard enough to know you're different from the man I married. You use your magic too often to be healthy. You do things that should not be possible. And now you want to . . . to what, exactly?"

"Someone has to take charge of Desolara and who better for the job than me? I could take the children with magic and train them, teach them how to use their magic," Father explained.

"Anyone is better than you. What will you even do with these children?"

"Hide them until they're old enough to understand. Keep them hidden safely away from anyone who won't understand."

"What will you do?"

"Build Desolara up from shambles."

"With what?"

"The materials from the asylums, of course. We break them down, me and my followers, then we build a new Desolara."

Mother stood up and turned away from Father. "I won't be a part of this. It's madness. I'm going to take Lucian and find somewhere new to live, somewhere away from you."

"Don't you want to be there by my side, love?"

"No, I don't, Cyrus. I want to be right here with you and our boy."

"You can be with me and him in the new world."

"Get out, Cyrus. Get out and don't come back."

My father stood and took a few steps toward the door. "Dee, wait."

"Get out."

"We don't have to be apart."

"Unless you change your mind, yes we do."

"Fine." He slammed the door shut and began to walk away, but then he saw me crouching by the window. "Lucian, come on."

I walked toward him, but Mother stepped outside and took my hand. "He isn't going anywhere with you."

"I'm his father, Dierdre."

"And I'm his mother. Go away, Cyrus. Leave us alone." There were tears in my mother's eyes now. "Please."

"Okay, I'll go. But I'll come back for him soon." Father smiled at me reassuringly. "I'll be back soon, my boy."

I watched him go in silence for a time before my mother pulled me back into our asylum, and then the sand and the shadows came back to me. I opened my eyes to see the man leaning over me, shaking my shoulder and calling my name. He looked hugely different from the man I had seen crossed legged only moments ago. This version of him was concerned for me. The man from earlier had a hard gaze and a stone expression. Feeling disoriented, I pushed him away and sat up. I breathed deeply and then composed myself enough to look at my father, who had gone back to being the steely man from before.

"I want you to come with me," he said.

"Why?" I breathed. It was not a question to his statement, but a question to something else. I think he understood what I was asking.

"I was protecting you from your mother. She doesn't believe in magic. She never liked it when I gave you lessons. I took you from her so I could train you. Isn't that what you want?"

"How could you chain me in that room for three years?"

He sighed. "I was waiting until your magic was at its peak."

"What for?"

"I have used too much of my magic over the years, and I'm weak. I've trained plenty of men with Obscurities, never Blessings, and it has numbed me to magic. I need you, Lucian. I need your magic to make the new world."

I blinked. "You want me to make the new world for you?"

"No. I want you to give me your magic so that I can make the new world."

With the headache and slight dizziness I still felt, his words nearly made me sick. "Is that possible?"

My father nodded and showed me his dagger. The handle was wrapped in black cloth, nothing fancy. Then I noticed that the blade was black on one edge and white on the other, like the two magics. I shivered absently and listened as he spoke. "I made this with the last of my magic, you know. I kept it hidden in one of the rooms, waiting for you to be ready. I wanted to wait a few more years, but I suppose there's no time like the present."

He walked toward me, and I found myself standing up and backing away until I hit the shades. He stood an inch away from me, the strange blade poised in his hand. I stared at him, at his eyes, and

noticed something I had not seen before. In my memories, the boy's father had the same pale blue eyes that I had. In all the memories, except the last one. In that vision, his eyes were bright blue, and they were like the man's who stood inches away. "My father would never hurt me," I whispered.

"I'm not going to kill you, Lucian, I only need your magic."

He grabbed me by the wrist, and I winced when his grasp tightened, making one of the blisters pop. He placed the knife against my palm and held it there. I closed my eyes and slowed my breathing. I thought of my father giving me lessons, warming me up, healing me when I was injured. I remembered all of it, and I remembered the time he left to find water and returned empty-handed and angry. He had not been himself after that, and the man with me now was not my father. I thought of my mother as well, her warm bread and perfect smile. I focused on my magic and felt my hand begin to heat up, growing increasingly hot. He cried out and I opened my eyes in time to see him yank it away, his hand bright red. I touched a couple shades with my hand, and they vanished. I ran.

I continued to run until I tripped, and face planted in the sand. I spit the grains out, letting out a soft groan. I rubbed the sand from my eyes and hair and face until I was satisfied, then used Obscurities to cool myself off. I had not realized until I touched my chest that I had not only burned that man, but I had also burned myself as well. It did not look terrible, only reddened from my forearm to my fingertips. I did not want to use too much magic, so I rested instead of healing.

"LUCIAN!"

I woke up immediately and jumped to my feet, expecting to see the man from earlier. What I saw was the Expanse and a few scattered asylums. I did not see another human being that could have called my name.

"LUCIAN!?"

I went toward the sound this time, wondering who was shouting at me. I followed the calls for a few minutes, then paused when I saw something in the distance. Several somethings, actually. I saw Amara beside her two little brothers, El on her knees, Daisy lying down in the sand. I did not see Nigel anywhere though. I walked the rest of the way toward them and wondered why they would be calling me. I was glad I had found them, but it worried me that they needed me for something. I stopped when I reached Amara and noticed the tears in her eyes and on her cheeks.

"Lucian, thank goodness. I didn't think you would hear me," she said, her voice hoarse.

I glanced at the twins and noticed both of them crying as well. I looked over Amara's shoulder to see El with her hands over her mouth, head bowed, choking on sobs. I turned my eyes to Daisy and the situation became apparent. Her skin was a sickly shade of gray, her eyes closed, her limbs limp. She still wore my sweatshirt, and I noticed that she was still breathing, albeit slower and slower.

I put my hands on Amara's shoulders. "What happened?"

"I don't know. We were just walking, and then . . . El said something was wrong. I looked back at her and saw Daisy on her knees. She . . . fell over and then stopped moving altogether." She brushed away her tears.

"She's still breathing, Amara," I said. "She'll be all right."

"How?"

I smiled at her and pulled my hands away. I gestured to her to stay as I walked toward El and her sister. El did not notice me sitting beside her until I put a hand on her back. She turned to me with teary eyes and shoved the hair out of her eyes. "El, I need you to go wait by the others, okay?"

She took some gasping breaths before calming down enough to talk. "What are you going to do?"

"Heal her."

"How?"

"With magic, of course. Go to Amara, El, please."

She nodded dejectedly and shakily rose to her feet. "What if it doesn't work, Lucian?"

I smiled at her and gently pushed her toward the others. "Please, El."

She went over to Amara and fell into the older girl's arms, her body racked with sobs. I turned away and carefully set Daisy on her back, my burned hand stinging. With my unhurt hand, I focused on my Blessings, and it began to glow with that soft, white glow. I cupped my other hand over it, as though I was holding a sphere, and closed my eyes. When I opened them again, the orb of light magic was there, bobbing up and down in a gentle locomotion. I focused until my other hand shone with Obscurities, then went to work. I opened her mouth and pushed the globe of Blessings through her colorless lips. My other hand stayed on her forehead to cool her off and prevent the light from burning her insides. I watched the glow slide down her throat, and then I pulled my hand away and waited.

I heard El scream and she pounded on my chest until I put my arms around her. I whispered in her ear to get her to calm down, but that did nothing except make her angrier. She hit my back again and again, though she was not hurting me.

"El, please, listen—"

"NO! You killed her, Lucian! You said you would heal her, but you LIED TO ME!" she shrieked.

"No, I didn't. I promise. She's right behind you," I said.

"Dead! She's dead behind me."

"El, she isn't dead. Turn around, please."

"Noooo!" She continued to hit me.

"El, stop it and listen to me, please!" I yelled over her. She stopped hitting me and pulled away, stunned that I had raised my voice. "I'm sorry I yelled at you, but I need you to listen. Daisy isn't dead. She's standing on her own two feet behind you, El." I coughed. "She's all right."

El spun around and gasped. There was her little sister, standing up and looking healthy as ever, if a little pale. Her eyes were bright and alive, her smile was wider than ever, and she could use her legs again. I stood to give them some privacy and went over to Amara, who was grinning as widely as the young girl. Cedric and Andrew ran over to the girls and embraced Daisy, laughing happily.

Amara pulled me into an embrace and smiled brightly at me. "That was amazing, Lucian! How did you—" She paused and looked at me. "Is something wrong? You look awful."

I sat down. "I'm okay."

"Then why do you look so . . . fatigued?"

"I think my father is in danger," I said to change the subject.

She sat down. "I thought your father was the one who captured us and created the Cage."

"He, well, my father is the one who made Desolara."

"What?"

I sighed. "I remember everything now. There were two Obscure Blessings that people knew about. My father, and the other one. Father made Desolara, the other man made the Cage. The man who made the Cage wants to create what he calls the new world. He's been gathering children and training them when they're old enough to understand magic, but he only trains those with Obscurities. However, he has used too much magic over those three years, and he is too frail to use magic."

Amara massaged her forehead. "Lucian, what does this have to

do with your father?"

"My father married my mother and they had me, a third Obscure Blessing. Three years ago, my father didn't come home. The man that did come home looked remarkably like Father, except his eyes. He took my father's magic with a blade that he created. Now, three years later, he has used all his magic again."

"I don't understand. Your father doesn't have his magic anymore, so in what way is he in danger?"

"The man will kill him, Amara."

She looked at me with narrowed eyes. "How do you know all this?"

"I spoke with the other man. I didn't realize he wasn't my father until then, but I know now."

"You know, there is still one thing that doesn't make sense. If your father is who you say he is, and he no longer has magic, then where does this other man expect to get magic from now?"

I closed my eyes briefly. "I was taken away from my mother by this man three years ago, shortly after he built the Cage. The men who carried me away used magic to make me unconscious, but it didn't work. I heard everything that happened and saw it all through slits. The man who pretended to be my father chained me in room three. I was only there so that he could take my magic when he was done with my real father's. Everyone else was brought to be trained in Obscurities or . . . not. It is my belief that the dagger was in one or two, and that Father is in the other."

"Wait. This man, who you held a conversation with, who pretended to be your father, who stole your father's magic, now wants to take your magic?" I nodded. "Why go through all that trouble for you? Why are you so special?"

"I'm the son of the man who created Desolara, Amara. I am the last person alive with both magics. This man, he doesn't just want one kind of magic, he wants both. He can't take one person's Blessings and one person's Obscurities because that isn't how he made the dagger. He made it to take both at once. To do that, he must take it from me."

"You're an Obscure Blessing, Lucian."

I smiled a small smile. "I know."

"I knew that too, but it means a lot more now."

"What does it mean?"

"For starters, you're the only person in all of Desolara who has both Blessings and Obscurities." She pursed her lips. "Unfortunately,

it also means that you're in terrible danger."

I coughed. "I know, Amara."

Before she could respond, Daisy ran up to me and hugged me with all the strength she had gained from being healed. She sat herself in my lap and grinned at me. I noticed that more color had returned to her skin, and she was not nearly as pale. Her big brown eyes were brighter than ever. I smiled back at her.

"Thank you, Lucian. Thank you, thank you, thank you!" she said.

"Always, Daisy."

She hugged me again and took her sister's hand, while I turned back to Amara. Her brothers were seated on either side of her, smiling as usual. Seeing the two of them there reminded me that I had not seen Nigel at all. I was about to ask about him, but El and Daisy distracted me. Daisy sat on one side of me and laid her head against my arm while her sister did the same on my other side. I smiled briefly at each of them and turned my attention back to Amara.

"Where's Nigel?"

The color drained from her face. "I don't know. He was here for a while, then we woke one morning, and he was just . . . gone."

The others nodded. "Do you think they took him away, Lucian?" Cedric asked.

"I don't know, but I do think that he's safe."

El furrowed her brows. "You're just saying that."

"El, I don't just say things. I really do believe he's okay."

She shrugged, and I coughed again. "Amara, shouldn't you guys have been at the asylum days ago?" I asked quietly.

"We are at the asylum. We didn't want to go in with Daisy being . . . the way she was though."

I swiveled my head in every direction and saw nothing. I had made myself feel sick, but that was about it. "Where is it?"

She stood up and climbed over the sand dune to our right. The twins followed her, and so did the girls. I stood up slowly and went after them, though it took me a while to get down the dune. I for some reason felt ill. My head hurt, I was sweaty, I felt nauseous, but I ignored those feelings and stood beside Amara. Directly in front of us was an asylum like the rest. Shattered windows, an unhinged door, crumbling wood, a sagging roof. In other words, a home. Andrew and Cedric bounded to the door and swung it open. I heard gasps from inside the asylum and Amara ran in with her cousins. There were more gasps and cries of joy. I was happy for them, but I did not

belong in their asylum. It was their family, and I had no right to go in there to ask if they would have me. I turned away and began to walk away, but I heard the door creak. I turned back to the asylum and saw a woman standing there in front of the closed door. Her long waves of dark brown hair were swept over her shoulder. Her eyes were that pale blue like mine and Father's. She wore a white dress with flowy sleeves that had embroidered vines on the thin material. She put a hand to her chest when she saw me, and tears glistened in her eyes.

As I could not walk quickly with my shaky legs and dizziness, it took a minute to reach her. When I did, I stood a few paces away from her. I had seen her in my memory of the woman in bed, wiping away a tear for me. I had not truly thought about her the way I had thought about my father. I had known he was alive; I had not known that she was alive also. I was at a loss for words.

She was not. She knew exactly what to say because she always knew exactly what to say, even if I did not want to hear it. "Oh Lucian, sweetheart. You're really here," she whispered.

I took her hand. "I'm here, Mother."

She smiled tiredly at me and pulled me into a tight hug. I wrapped my arms her, and I put my head on her shoulder as we sank to our knees. We stayed like that for a time. When she pulled away, I noticed the dark circles under her eyes from lack of sleep. She brushed her tears away and turned to me.

"You look thin and exhausted, Lucian." She said my name in a way that made me think she had been waiting for me to come back. As though she had not said it enough times. "Are you hurt or sick?"

"I'm okay, Mother Dear. Really."

She raised a brow at me. "Then what's this?" She lifted one of my hands and nodded toward the blisters and scabs. "And this?" She lifted my other hand that looked like it had been burned by the sun. Mother sighed. "You need to heal yourself, Lucian."

"Can it not wait until I've slept?"

"Lucian, please."

"Yes, Mother."

I shut my eyes and held my hands side by side, both with the palms toward the sky. I thought of the orb and felt it form in my hands. When I opened my eyes, it was there, resting softly on my skin. I brought my hands to my mouth and swallowed the globe of light, placing a hand of Obscurities over my chest. I watched the bruises and blisters fade from my wrists, saw the burn disappear

from my arm, felt my sunburned face stop itching and burning. I certainly felt immensely better, but it had not healed me of exhaustion nor thirst nor hunger. I still felt shaky and feeble.

My mother smiled at me and rose to her feet. "I'll take you to your room."

I let her do all the work in pulling me to my feet and followed her into the asylum. It was a large open area with no separation between rooms, save the bedrooms and bathroom. There were four doors inside which meant there were three rooms and a bathroom. The kitchen appliances and things were on the left side of the house, the sitting room to the right with few furnishings, and in the center was the hall which led to the bedroom and bathroom. There were two rickety wooden doors on either side of the narrow hall, and Mother took me directly to the farthest door on the right. In the little room was a bed against the far wall beside a broken window, a short table opposite the bed, a chair in the far-right corner, and a sandy rug over the concrete floor. Everything was dusty and sand-covered, as though it had been a long time since someone had slept there.

I went straight for the bed and sat on the mattress's edge. Mother came to sit beside me and wrapped her arm around my shoulders, pulling me near. We sat in silence until I could no longer bear it. "Do you know about Father?" I asked.

She looked at me sadly. "Do I know that he took you away from me for three years? That he has abandoned our family? That he stole the children of too many mothers to count? I don't know to which offense you're referring."

I flinched at the anger in her tone. "Father didn't do those things. He was stolen from us, like I was stolen from you. The man who made the Cage, that's who took him away. He took Father's magic." I paused and raised my head to look at her. "Mother, I think he's in danger."

"Lucian, how do you know all this?"

"I . . . just know. I need you to believe me. He needs my help."

"Okay. Of course I believe you. But what are you going to do to help him? You'll get hurt, Lucian. I can't lose you again."

I told her about the man's blade that took away both magics simultaneously. I told her that he was weak and could not use magic. I explained that he had tried to hurt me and take my magic but had failed. I told her that because he already had Father's magic, there was no reason for him to keep Father. When I finished, she turned away and stared out the window for a long time. I waited long

enough that I was ready to give up on her ever replying when she did at last speak.

"You should rest. I'll bring something for you to eat when you wake up. If you need something to drink, there's a glass of water on the table." She kissed my forehead and walked to the door.

I laid my head back on the pillow but did not bother using the light blue duvet. "Mother Dear?" I called.

She poked her head back into the room. "Yes?"

"Thank you."

She smiled and disappeared down the hall to do whatever it was she had been doing before I showed up. I shut my eyes after she closed the door and would have fallen asleep, except I felt ill. I felt shaky and strange, which might have been from lack of sleep. Or maybe my lightheadedness was a symptom of hunger and thirst. I inhaled deeply and stumbled over to the glass of murky water, drinking most of it in a gulp. Unfortunately, that was a mistake. I leaned my head through the window, and it came right back up, splattering on the sand. I went to the chair and sat down, pulling my knees close. I knew what was wrong because I had done it to myself. When you heal someone, the sickness needs somewhere to go. You cannot just make it vanish. I had given myself terra fever when I healed Daisy because it was either me or one of the others, and I could not do that to them. To this day, I regret nothing. Well, that is not entirely true. I regret many things, none of which have yet come to pass in this story, but I regret them with every breath I take.

I looked up and stared at the few drops of water remaining in the cup, wondering whether I could rid myself of the illness by way of water. I coughed and grabbed the glass off the table, my other hand already glowing with the sphere. I swallowed it, still holding the cup, and touched my chest with Obscurities. The water had not changed, though I did notice that my shaking had lessened greatly. I sank to the floor and let the glass roll from my fingers as I leaned against the bed. I smiled briefly and fell into a restful, dreamless sleep at last.

A knock at the door woke me. I pushed myself to my feet and walked over to it, noticing that my movements were not slow and stumbly as before. I felt much better than I had in recent days and when I opened the door, I was smiling. Mother returned my smile and pushed the door open entirely.

"I trust you slept well?" she asked.

"I did," I answered.

She kissed the top of my head. "I'm so happy to see you,

sweetheart."

"And I you, Mother."

"Breakfast is in kitchen, if you're hungry."

I nodded. "I wanted to speak with you. About Father."

Her expression shifted from happiness to grief and anger in less than a second. "There's nothing to talk about." She gave me quick smile and walked down the hall.

"He isn't safe, Mother. Please, I need you to believe me," I called after her. "You know he would never leave us, never do that to you or to me." I grew quiet and listened for a response, but there was none. "Mother?"

The girl that walked into my room was not my mother and could not have looked different. Frizzy hair the color of honey, green eyes, lots of earrings. She was wearing the same thing she had been wearing the day I met her. "Hello, Lucian."

"Hi, Amara. Do you need something?"

"You ate nothing last night. You slept for ages. What's up?"

I shrugged. "I was exhausted."

"And?"

I walked out the door and started down the hall, but she grabbed my wrist and stopped me. "You looked terrible the last time I saw you, Lucian."

"Thanks."

"What I mean is, people don't just get better overnight. Something was wrong and now it's not. What did you do?"

I pulled my hand away from her and sighed. "Do you know how to heal with Blessings?" I asked her.

Amara folded her arms over her chest. "Of course I do."

"Okay. Then you know that, unless it's a physical wound, the illness has to go somewhere, yes?"

"Right . . ."

"I had terra fever for a short time after healing Daisy."

"But you don't anymore?"

"Nope. I'm going to eat something now."

"Wait, Lucian." I looked over my shoulder at her. "I need to talk to you with El and Cedric."

"All right, but—"

"I know, I know. Go eat something."

I smiled and made it to the kitchen at last. My mother was not in the kitchen or the living room, so I figured she had gone to her room. The people that were there, I did not recognize. There was a

woman with honey colored hair that rested jovially on her slender shoulders. Her eyes were green, but rather than white she wore a simple back dress. The man who was seated in the living room looked like an older version of Andrew with a beard. He had hair the color of straw and a beard a shade darker. His eyes were bright and green, and he seemed physically incapable of not smiling as wide as possible.

I smiled politely at the woman as I made my way into the kitchen. She put a warm muffin in my hands and gestured to a chair. I took the chair and she sat across from me. "I'm told that I have you to thank for bringing Cedric and Daisy home," she said.

I shrugged. "It was only simple magic. Anyone else would have done the same thing, I'm sure."

She looked at me oddly for a minute, then held out her hand. "I'm Ina. Amara, the twins', and Nigel's mother." I noticed that her voice caught when she said Nigel's name.

"I'm Lucian," I said, shaking her hand.

"I know. Amara and the boys told me enough to fill a book."

I did not know what to say in response to that, so instead I apologized. "Mrs. Ina, I'm sorry about . . . everything. All of it is my fault, and I apologize."

Ina furrowed her brows. "Sorry? Lucian, none of this is in any way your fault. If I understand everything your mother has told me correctly, then you were taken as well. You're not to blame."

I smiled sadly as she walked away, absently placing my muffin on a nearby table. If only I could believe that it was not my fault, then perhaps I would not feel hopeless. Sure, being freed from the Cage had changed my heart and I was certainly happier, but there would always be a darkness in my heart that had not been there before. Maybe it was because of what I thought my father had done or maybe it was because I knew he had not done those things and was in chains. I did not know, but I did know that I would never truly be the same boy I once was. The memories would never leave, nor the nightmares, nor the flicker of that candle. Even today, they still drift in my mind's eye, taunting and reminding me of those awful days in darkness. To be honest, I still was unsure whether I knew the absolute difference between dark and light.

All of those musings aside, it's time to get on with my story so listen closely, friend.

I stood up from the chair and went to look for Mother. If I could only spend a little more time with her, I was certain I would be able to convince her that Father needed our help. She may not have

magic, but the Cage was not far from the asylum, and she could take me there. I had seen her there on a dune in my vision, brushing a tear from her cheek. I wondered briefly why she had only watched me get taken away rather than chase after me to bring me home, but I did not allow myself to dwell on that for long. Instead, I pulled open the door and stepped outside for a moment. I did not really know what I hoped to find out there because I knew immediately that my mother was not out there, but perhaps I had stepped out to be alone for a moment. I was accustomed to being alone after three years in the Cage, not being surrounded by a crowd of people I scarcely knew. Anyway, I leaned against the wall to the side of the door and folded my arms over my chest. I was staring past all the asylums into the Expanse when the flimsy door slammed into my face.

I yelped and shoved the door away, rubbing my nose. I stepped a short distance from the house and scowled at Amara. "That hurt," I muttered.

She pursed her lips to hide her smile. "Sorry, I didn't see you."

I rolled my eyes. "Clearly." I walked to stand in front of her and returned my arms to their prior position. "Aside from hitting me with the door, what was it you wanted?"

"Oh, I didn't come out here for you."

I smiled. "Then why are you out here?"

"I wanted a second away from everyone. I haven't been gone for a terribly long time but coming back home to all the noise and . . . and the normalcy is overwhelming. I don't know why I'm telling you all of this." She closed the door and turned away from me. "What are you doing out here?"

I let my smile fade, in part because she was obviously upset about something, although it was mostly because she was not telling me the entire truth. I stepped closer to her and stared into the Expanse the same way she was. "What's wrong, Amara?"

She shrugged. "Nothing. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm positive. I need a minute, all right?"

I stepped back. "Okay." I turned back to the door and pulled it open. "Do you know where my mother went?" I asked over my shoulder.

"Sure. She said she wasn't feeling well and went to lie down."

I nodded, though I doubt she saw it, and shut the door behind me. I had not taken three steps before Daisy, Andrew, and Cedric gathered around me. I knelt so we were level and they bombarded me

with questions.

"Come play with us, Lucian!"

"We have something you need to see."

"Do you want to see where my room is?"

"Please, Lucian?"

I was about to answer their questions when El and Ina smiled apologetically at me as they pulled the children away. I stood up and made my way down the hall, stopping at the door opposite my own. I figured Mother would want to stay close to me, so I pulled open the door and went inside. My breath caught in my throat when I saw my mother lying on the bed, shivering under three thin blankets. Her skin was paler than Daisy's ever had been, and she looked so frail. I went to sit with her on the bed, my hands already glowing with Blessings and Obscurities. She did not open her eyes as I pushed the orb into her mouth and laid a hand on her forehead to cool her. She shivered beneath all the covers, then went still when I pulled my hand away. I took her hand in mine and gave her a constant warmth with my magic.

I stared at her for a time, partly expecting her chest to stop rising and falling, but it never did. My head began to pound after a few hours because of the magic I was using to sustain Mother's warmth. I closed my eyes and held my head in my free hand. I fell asleep soon after and had a strange dream. It began with a *door that opened to reveal a hunched figure. There were lengths of chain that hung from the ceiling for wrists and a pair in the ground for ankles. When the ceiling chains were raised, whoever was bound would be lifted off the ground and unable to move their arms or legs. All of that aside, the figure was hunched in a dark corner of the room. There was no light except a stubby candle. My dream-self saw a man enter the room that I recognized instantly. He was the man who wanted my magic to make his new world. He approached the sad figure and crouched before him. The figure lifted his head enough that I could recognize him as well. He was my father, though he looked haggard. His skin was pale and papery, his clothes hung from his frame, and there were brown stains all over his shirt and pants.*

The man smiled and spoke in a soft voice. "I found him, Cyrus."

Father glared at him. "But you don't have him."

"No, not yet. I've sent someone to bring him here."

"If you lay a finger on him, Abner, I swear I'll—"

Abner laughed lightly. "You'll what? Kill me?" He jangled the chains that bound my father. "You can hardly move, Cyrus. The boy is

mine now, and you can do nothing to stop me."

*My father's eyes drifted to where I stood in the dream. "Lucian."
"Father?"*

"Lucian, wake up." Father's voice shifted into that of a girl.

I sat up and rubbed my face with my hand. Amara was leaning over me with her eyebrows scrunched together and worry in her eyes. Mother was still asleep beside me, her hand still resting limply in my own. Amara gently pulled my hand away and looked at me.

"Lucian . . ." She changed her mind about whatever she was going to say and pursed her lips. "Are you okay?"

I ran a hand through my hair. "Of course."

She rolled her eyes and folded her arms over her chest. "That, I think, is the first lie I've heard from you."

I sighed. "What makes you think I'm not okay?"

She raised a brow. "Really?" I shrugged. "Have you eaten anything since you were free from the Cage?" I shook my head. "Had anything to drink?" I nodded. "Good. But you haven't washed or changed clothes. I mean, come on. You've been wearing those for three years. Frankly, I'm impressed they fit you." She glanced at the pants that were short enough to be capris and my shirt that could have fit El. "Well, that you can at least wear them." She gestured toward me. "Your clothes only fit because you're an unhealthy amount of thin. You're pale and . . . You're flushed." Amara pressed her hand against my forehead. "Lucian, you're burning with fever and you're trying to tell me that you're all right?" she scolded.

I stood up, ignoring my aching muscles and the chills that ran up and down my spine. "I used magic on my mother for a while. It will pass."

She looked skeptical but ceased her rant about my unhealthiness. "Fine, but you really shouldn't use so much magic."

I cocked my head. "Why do you care so much?"

"Based on everything you told me about that man—"

"Abner. His name is Abner," I interrupted, surprising myself a little with the information.

"Based on everything you told me about Abner, I think it would be wise for you to quit using magic so often. He lost his because he used it too often and the same shouldn't happen to you."

"Why not? What's so important about my magic?"

"Is that a trick question? You're the last person alive with both magics. You're the last Obscure Blessing, Lucian. You can't just throw that away."

"Why does that matter so much? What is it that everyone expects me to do?"

Amara pressed her brow together. "What do you mean?"

"Why is being an Obscure Blessing important at all?"

"I don't know. You're just the only person with both dark and light magic, which naturally makes you the most powerful. Your father created Desolara. Before that, the world was destroyed and broken. Everyone was dying for one reason or another. So he changed the world into something different. Something new."

I closed my eyes. My father had created a new world, that was entirely true, but was it really any better? People were still dying and getting sick, perhaps more so than before. I was the only person that could heal terra fever, as long as it had not been in the system for years, like my mother's had. I thought about Abner and what he was trying to do. Was it really such a terrible thing that he wanted to create this new world? I could do that with my own magic. It would be the same as him doing it except I would not do it to have control over everything.

"Lucian?" Amara said, breaking me from my thoughts.

I opened my eyes and smiled at her. "I'm sorry. Why did you come in here?"

"I need to talk to you with Cedric and El. We can go to your room."

"All right."

I followed her out the door and we went into my room. I was not surprised to see that the others were there already. I sat in the chair in the corner while everyone else piled up on the bed, all looking to me. What for, I did not know. Amara was the one who wanted to talk to me, so I wondered why they did not look to her.

"I don't know what to say," I said.

El grinned. "We're going to help you get your dad."

I raised my brows. "Why?"

"Aren't you going to anyway?" Cedric asked.

"Yes, he's my father."

"Then we're coming too. You need our help."

I laughed lightly. "I appreciate your concern for me, honest. But I don't think that's a good idea."

Amara frowned. "You're not the only one who has a family. I'm coming with you and so is El. She's really good at healing with Blessings, if either of us get hurt."

I turned to El and Cedric. "Why don't the two of you go find

something to eat," I suggested. Cedric pouted and El rolled her eyes, but they both left as I had asked. I focused my gaze on Amara. "You really believe Nigel is there?"

"I don't know," she muttered.

"Look, I don't want to jump to conclusions, but Abner only wanted people with Obscurities. There might not be a reason for him to keep Nigel there."

"What are you saying?"

"I don't want you to do anything rash because you think your brother might be there. There is a chance that—"

"Stop talking, please. I know he's there, so I'm coming with you," she insisted.

"That's fine, but El and Cedric are not coming."

"Okay. When do we leave?"

I shrugged. "I'll let you know."

Amara nodded, and we sat in silence until the others returned with a small tray of food. We sat in a semicircle on the floor and Daisy and Andrew joined us shortly. We laughed and ate and just enjoyed ourselves. I smiled too and I could almost believe that everything was perfect, and we would be okay. Only every time I thought that, a small part of me would cringe and scold me for pretending. I ignored that bit of myself for the most part, allowing that happiness to grow in my heart. Seeing the twins make fun of one another, Amara laughing with El, Daisy grinning at the boys and her sister, it was all awesome. I wished I had something like that to return to when I finished bringing my father home, but my plan did not end that way. I would have told Amara about my plan, but she would just as easily talk me out of it. I could not let that happen, so I would keep it to myself until the very last second. It was for the best. If only I had known then how wrong I was.

I stayed in my room after everyone else left, sitting in the chair with my legs pulled close. I was not feverish anymore, as my magic had replenished itself, but I was anxious. Mother was dying and Father was in awful condition if my dream had been a vision. I wondered if I had seen that because of my magic or because of someone else's magic, but neither my father nor Abner had any magic left. I wondered if—this is about to sound really crazy—it was Nigel who had given me that vision. For him to accomplish something like that, he would need to be near me while I slept, which already made no sense. He would have to be able to use Obscurities, which I knew he could not. Basically, it was completely stupid to think it could be

his doing. Except that it was not. Giving someone your magic was possible, but it had to be the same type of magic they already had. I could never give my magic to anyone because I had both kinds, but everyone could give me their magic for the same reason. Now, if Nigel were to use every bit of Blessings in his body, then it would be entirely possible for someone else in the Cage to provide him with Obscurities, as he could have any magic. All he needed to do after that was sneak into the house through a broken window and touch my head with Obscurities, projecting the image into my dreams.

Now, I know, all that is rather far-fetched. You do not have to believe anything I tell you, that is your choice, but I did promise I would never lie or bend the truth. That is what was going through my head at the time, and I felt compelled to let you know because perhaps it is important to my story. Perhaps it is not, and it was all for nothing, but you will never know for certain if you stop listening.

As I was thinking about Nigel and the Cage, my thoughts inevitably drifted to my father. I recalled his frail demeanor from the dream, the quietness of his voice. I wondered whether he would still be alive when I got there. He looked nothing like the man I remembered from my childhood. He looked a breath away from death. I was happy here, with Amara and her brothers and their cousins. I was happy with Mother, even if she was dying. Yes, I absolutely wanted to rescue my father, but was he worth giving up a good life for? Maybe I would live, but I doubted those were Abner's plans if he got his hands on me. I was pretty sure he wanted to kill me after he had all my magic. He would kill my father too, as he was useless without magic.

I sighed and let my head fall in my hands. I had to save my father, if only so Mother would believe me. I had to do it alone as well. Amara would only be in unnecessary danger if I brought her with me, and I did not want her to get hurt because of me. I would be putting myself in unnecessary danger as well, but I was already in danger. I mean, Abner was going to find me eventually.

I shook my head to clear it and stared out the window pointlessly. Outside, it was so bright and sunshiny. That was the good of light in the world, contained outdoors. The evil of dark was everywhere else. In every corner of the asylums, every shadow, every room of the Cage. To me, it seemed there was too much darkness for anyone to truly be happy. There was too much sand and too much brokenness. Father had tried to make a better world, and Desolara was the thing he created. What must he have been thinking to do

something like that, to create something so lifeless? I supposed I could ask him about it when I saw him in room one.

Something out the window caught my attention and brought me back to reality. I rose from the chair and went to the broken glass, searching for the slight movement outside. I saw nothing for a minute, then it moved again. It was quick and bright, perhaps slightly humanoid. I was unsure what I was looking at until it moved once more, closer now to the asylum I was in. I used Obscurities in my vision without thinking to block the light and saw right through the magic to the boy behind it. Blond waves, blue eyes, black clothes. I recognized Amara's older brother and wondered what he was doing. I watched for another moment, then left my room and found Amara in the kitchen with her mother.

They were laughing at something El had said, and I hesitated to interrupt. I got over my hesitation quickly enough and went into the kitchen. Ina smiled at me and started a conversation with El, drawing the girl into the living area. I was glad she seemed to have caught on and gave her a thankful smile before turning my full attention to Amara.

"I need you to—" I began.

She stopped me. "Oh, I found some of Nigel's old clothes. I left them in your mother's room. You should change."

"I don't—"

"Just do it. The clothes you're wearing cannot possibly be comfortable. I'll talk after you're wearing clothes that fit."

"Amara, there isn't time—"

She waved away my concern and I resisted the urge to scowl at her. I went into my mother's room and hastily grabbed a white sweatshirt and gray pants. They were the same as what I wore in the Cage, except they actually fit properly when I pulled them on. I returned to the kitchen and Amara grinned at me. I did not return her smile, and she frowned when she finally, finally noticed the worry on my face.

"Did something happen? Don't they fit?" she asked.

I swiped my hands down my face and sighed. "This is nothing to do with the clothes, Amara. Nigel isn't at the Cage. He's—" The door flung open before I could finish, and he stepped inside. "—here," I whispered.

Nigel was surrounded by his family in a matter of seconds. Amara hugged him and wiped furiously at the tears in her eyes. Ina and Julian embraced him and wept. The twins and his young cousins

grinned and flung themselves at him. It was amazing to see how much they all cared for him. It would have been even more amazing if he had shown the same care for them as they showed for him, but he did no such thing. Instead, he glared at me the entire time. He had not come to see his dear family, he had come to retrieve me. I saw the hate and the greed in his eyes, the jealousy. I returned to my room, no longer able to stand seeing him there and pretending to miss his brothers and sisters. It made me sick to my stomach.

I was pacing back and forth when someone knocked on the door, stopping me dead in the center of the room. I pulled open the door carefully, fully anticipating Nigel to be standing on the other side, only to see his sister. I took her by the arm and pulled her inside, shutting the door behind me.

"What's going on with you? Nigel is home, Lucian. Aren't you glad?" she demanded.

I wanted to be glad that he was here, that her family was back together, I truly did. I could not look past the fact that he had betrayed them all and that he was going to leave again and break their hearts a second time. "I'm sorry. I can't let you come with me when I go to get my father. You're safer here."

"You can't go alone. You won't be safe either. You'll get yourself killed. Please, take me with you."

"I can't."

She frowned. "Lucian, listen to me. Let me go with you. I can help you. You don't understand. Please," she begged.

What was even happening right now? "I . . . I can take Nigel with me, if that will make you feel better."

"No, don't do that. You need to let me come."

"Amara . . ."

Nigel pulled open the door and stepped into my room, closing it silently behind him. He walked to his sister and put an arm around her shoulders, grinning at me. "I'll take him to the Cage. It's really no trouble at all."

Tears sprang to Amara's eyes, and she stared at the floor. "This isn't what we talked about, Nigel. You promised you wouldn't hurt him. Please, let me take him."

"It's a little late for that, sis. I won't hurt him, promise."

She looked up at him with glistening tears in her eyes. "Really?" He nodded and grew serious. "Really."

I, meanwhile, had been listening to their little conversation and was far more confused than I had ever been. Nigel was working with

Abner, that much I knew. He had come here to bring me to the Cage. Then there was Amara. I did not understand her part in this at all. Or maybe I did not want to understand her part. Nigel's betrayal was not a huge let down, because I hardly knew the guy and he had always seemed suspicious to me. His sister though, she was my friend. She had freed me from the Cage. She had worried for me, talked to me, laughed with me. She had become special and dear to my heart. I did not know what to think about her anymore. All that time, in the Cage, and now this.

"Amara, you can leave now. I'm taking him to Abner," Nigel said.

She stepped away from him, toward me and the door, and more tears fell down her cheeks. "Don't hurt him."

Her brother rolled his eyes and gave his usual scowl. "He didn't let you go so you could argue with everything. Go make up something to tell our dear parents, won't you?"

She did not deign to look at me as she pulled open the door, but I grabbed her wrist to stop her. She glanced up at me briefly and turned away, probably seeing the hurt and anger in my eyes. "You knew. You this entire time," I whispered.

"Lucian—"

"No," I snapped. "Don't apologize. You led him here. He was never gone, was he? He went back to the Cage. When you wanted to be alone, you were waiting for him." She said nothing. "If I had taken you with me, what were you going to do?" I demanded.

She finally managed to look me in the eye. "Do you really want to know?"

That itself was answer enough, but I wanted to hear her say it. "What were you going to do?"

"I was going to let him have you," she breathed.

"Everything you told me was a lie then? You didn't escape, he let you out because you agreed to bring me to him. Were you even really captured or was that a lie too?"

She shook her head. "No, you don't understand. I was helping Nigel. I was trying to make the world better. We're miserable—"

"Yeah, you are." I dropped her wrist and stepped away.

Tears dripped onto the concrete floor, spattering and washing away some of the grit. "I'm so sorry, Lucian."

I turned away from her. "Me too, Amara."

She sighed and closed the door as she left the room. I was sorry, sorry she had done something so awful. All this time, she had been against me and my father. She was never going to help me free him,

she was going to imprison me. She was willing to let me die if it meant her brother would get what he wanted, if it meant the world would be a better place. It sickened me, and yet I could not help but wonder whether I would have done the same. I was willing to do anything to get my father back. Amara had been willing to do anything to help her brother. That did not make what she had done right by any means, and it broke my heart to see her look so pitiful, but she had done it to herself. I could not forgive her for betraying my trust. She had let me go and given me hope, then just as quickly threw my life away. That was why I could not forgive her.

Nigel pouted. "Oh no, poor Amara betrayed you. You must feel so stupid."

I turned my glare on him. "I have half a mind to use magic on you."

He grinned, which looked askew on his face. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

My hands were already glowing with Obscurities. "Why is that?"

He studied his fingernails, his hand shining with a faint white glow. I heard a few gasps from behind the door, a scream. Strange noises coming down the hall. The door opened and my jaw dropped. The thing that shut the door was a humanoid blob of light, much like the thing I had seen out my window. It pulsed with Blessings and was nearly bright enough to blind. The figure dissolved and Daisy dropped from its arms in a heap to the floor. Nigel lifted her up and held his hand by her neck, using more magic to make a white blade. I was horrified that he would ever think to make such hideous things with something so beautiful. Magic was not a thing to be abused and to destroy, but to heal and create. The way Nigel used his Blessings was the very farthest thing from a blessing to the world.

Daisy squirmed in Nigel's arms, but he only tightened his grip and pressed the knife against her neck. "You want to change your mind now?"

I looked at Daisy and saw her pleading eyes. I closed my eyes and raised my hands in surrender. "You have to swear you won't hurt anyone if I go with you," I said softly.

Daisy was shaking head slowly. "No harm will come to any of them," Nigel replied.

"Swear it on your life, Nigel."

He rolled his eyes. "Fine, fine. I swear on my life that I won't hurt anyone if you come with me to the Cage."

I nodded, and he shoved his cousin toward me. I caught her and

she flung her arms around me. I gave her a quick hug then held her back by her shoulders. "It's all right, Daisy. I'm going to come back, and everything will be okay."

She nodded. "Promise to be careful, Lucian."

"Always," I told her.

She kissed my cheek and scampered out the door, not daring to glance backward. I took a breath and turned back to Nigel. "What are you going to do?"

He walked closer until he stood less than a foot away. "I'm going to make sure you can't go anywhere without me, then we're both going to the Cage."

"How are you going to do that?" I asked.

"With magic and these." He reached down and pulled a length of chain with cuffs on either side from his boot. He closed one of the metal bracelets around his own wrist, then he grabbed my arm and shut the other one over my wrist. I would not be going anywhere without him in tow for a while, I imagined. "Now, since he doesn't want you wasting any magic, I'll provide a means of transport."

He rubbed his hands together and blew on them, scattering the light into the room. The magic from each hand gathered and grew into two of the light creatures. One lifted Nigel into its arms while the other lifted me. I did not see how they could possibly be any faster than us, but I did not voice this. Instead, I avoided Nigel's gaze and sighed as the creatures gradually made their way through the window. The moment their feet landed on the sand, however, they took off. I do not mean they were simply running. I mean they were sprinting quicker than humanly possible, which I supposed was not a sufficient comparison, as they were not human. They were running fast enough that the wind blew in my face and made my eyes water. I had to hold onto the magic creature to keep myself from tumbling out of its arms. They were both careful to stay near so the chain would not yank one of us from their grasp. Although, come to think of it, I think if I had fallen, they would have dragged me along. I shivered at the thought and clung to its arms.

During the ride, Nigel slept. He relaxed into the creature's embrace and closed his eyes. His body slumped into sleep in no time, which infuriated me. Yes, it was a waste of time to be angry with him, but I had nothing better to do. I glared at him while he slept and eventually fell asleep myself.

I saw Abner with my father in room one again. Father's eyes were red, as though he had been crying. Abner was standing with the

chains, staring gleefully at Father.

"How tall do you suppose your boy is now? What is he, fourteen? Thirteen?" Abner said.

"He's fifteen," Father muttered.

"You know," Abner said while adjusting the chains, "he isn't terribly tall. I think this should do until he gets here. What do you think, Cyrus?"

"I think you're a fool."

Abner's grin faded. "Perhaps I should put you back in these chains."

"I would rather be in those chains again than see Lucian in them," Father replied.

"How sweet," Abner's smile returned, but it did not reach his eyes. "Too bad for you it's your son's magic I want." He went to the door. "Rest assured knowing I won't kill him. I'm not a horrible person, you know. I'm trying to make a new world, something you failed miserably at doing." He slammed the door shut.

My eyes flew open, and it took me a moment to remember where I was. I was still held in the light creature's arms. We had yet to reach the Cage. I readjusted myself and looked at Nigel. He was still asleep. I wondered if he was not asleep but passed out from his constant use of magic to keep the creatures going. I then wondered why he was doing this. What had Abner offered him that he could not get himself? What was so important to him that he had managed to manipulate Amara into helping him? It irked me that he could do something like that to his own sister. To his entire family. To return for less than an hour, giving them hope, and then leave them all behind. I could only imagine what Amara told her parents. I was sure she had lied to them because she would never tell them the truth. It would have broken their hearts to know what their son had done.

I shook my head to clear my mind of such things and turned my gaze straight ahead. I heard Amara's broken voice echo in my head. "I was going to let him have you," she had said. I barely knew her anymore. I thought she was kind and I thought I could trust her, but I did not know who to trust anymore. Amara wanted a new world; she wanted her brother to have whatever he wanted. I wanted so badly to believe that she had not known what she was doing, what she was falling for, but my heart would not allow it. I remembered her not wanting to leave me alone in that room with the candle as my only company, but I had convinced her to, and she came back like she promised she would. I wondered if I would have stayed in that room,

knowing what I know now. Would I have refused to go with Amara knowing she would only bring me back? I think, for freedom, I would have done almost anything.

I was about to rest again when the creature holding me came to a halt and dumped me on the ground, vanishing into thin air. Nigel chuckled under his breath and yanked me to my feet, all the while staring at the massive building before us. It was exactly as I remembered with the brown concrete and missing door. The squares that were each a room. It seemed more gritted with sand and dirt than when I had left, but aside from that it was the same.

I stared at it until Nigel yanked on the chain, forcing me to follow him inside the structure. I begrudgingly went with him and shivered the moment we stepped inside. It was every bit as chilly as I recalled and I dreaded the moment I would be confined by chains again, unable to move. The only upside to this was being able to see my father again. Three years without having seen him in the flesh, and I was so close to him. I must have stopped in front of door one for a time because Nigel impatiently yanked on the chain, and I stumbled after him. We made it to the door with a zero etched into the brown concrete and Nigel produced a key from his pocket. He unlocked the chains and knocked on the door, keeping a firm grip on my arm. Someone inside the room muttered something that must have been an invitation to enter because Nigel opened the door and shoved me inside, slamming it closed behind me.

The man at the concrete desk smiled at me as he rubbed his bearded chin. He looked exactly as he had that day in the desert when he had first shown me his knife. I scowled at him and stayed exactly where I was, waiting for him to say something. He stood from his chair behind the desk and came to stand in front of me, returning the glare.

"I'm glad you came, Lucian. I was worried Nigel might have to hurt you," Abner said.

"What did you promise him, Abner?"

"Only what he already wanted. Obscurities."

"You'd sooner kill him than make any of your trained guards give up their magic."

He smiled at me. "Quite right. But none of that should be any concern of yours. Instead, I'm sure you'd like to see your dear old dad."

I took a step back. "What if I don't want to see my father?"

"You don't get a say in the matter."

He held out his hand and one of the two guards on either side of the door handed him shackles. I groaned inwardly as he spun me around and metal bit into my skin.

"You could have left the other ones on," I said as he shoved me forward toward the now-open door.

"No, they had a much farther reach. These are better for now."

With a painful grip on my shoulder, he steered me in the proper direction. We passed my door, room three, and I felt sorry for the person that might have been in there. We passed the second room, which was empty because I knew Abner had his special blade with him. Then we made it to the first door, where my father had been waiting for three years. I felt my heart pound against my ribs as Abner pushed open the concrete door. I heard myself release a breath when I saw him huddled in the corner. Abner pushed me toward my father, and I stumbled to my knees. He had not raised his head, as I doubted he expected to see me sitting there. I noticed the streaks of gray in his dirty brown hair, the disarray of his beard, his papery skin. He seemed tiny compared to the man behind me, though Abner was still thin himself.

I wondered if he would recognize me when he lifted his head, or if he would think I was a trick. "Father?"

His tired eyes met mine and tears glistened in them. He raised his hands and held my head in them, then he pulled me into a hug. I laid my head on his shoulder and swallowed a lump in my throat. He pulled away from me and gave me a tiny smile at last.

"I missed you, Lucian, so much," he whispered to me. "But you can't stay here. You must leave. Use your magic and go."

I shook my head. "I can't do that, Father," I replied. "There's something else I need to do."

Father frowned. "No, Lucian, please. You cannot stay here."

I smiled at him as Abner dragged me to my feet, but I said nothing more. I steeled myself when I was made to stand by the chains, not ready for what Abner was going to do but knowing that I had to go through with it. The man beside me sensed my fear and smirked.

"I won't kill you, Lucian. I just need your magic. Look at your father. I left him alive. You shouldn't worry too much."

He moved behind me and undid the chains, walking me forward and turning me toward my father, who was shaking his head hopelessly and would not look in my direction. I let Abner lift my arms and close the metal bracelets around my wrists. He knelt and

enclosed my ankles in metal as well. Then he stepped behind me and twisted something that tightened the chains until I could no longer touch the ground. My shoulders and thighs began to ache within seconds. I felt as though I were being quartered, torn limb from limb. I must admit, looking back on it, that perhaps I exaggerated a touch. It was not truthfully that agonizing.

Abner was holding his precious dagger when he returned to my line of sight. It glowed with dark and light magic, as it had before, and I shuddered. "The chains are only to make sure you don't squirm away. I wouldn't want to accidentally cut your leg off." He pressed the knife against my abdomen. "Perhaps I should remove your shirt. You don't want it to look like your father's, believe me." He cut it to shreds that fell limply to the floor. "Now, I apologize for the pain but there's really nothing for it."

I closed my eyes and sucked in a breath, but it only came out as a strangled gasp when he stuck the blade into my skin and cut a line through me. He slashed another cut across my body, and I bit back a cry of pain. He did it one more time, deeper than the others, and I screamed then. Abner wiped the blood from his knife with a piece of my shirt and held up the brilliant blade so I could see it. He wanted me to see all my magic inside it, about to be inside him.

I pried my eyes open and lifted my head to see the shimmering blade. It really was beautiful, if you want to hear the truth. The white glow and the black shine of the dagger pulsed with magic. I had nothing to say, so I dropped my chin to my chest and tried to still my racing heart, but I could not. My blood slithered down me and dripped to the floor. Abner seemed disappointed that I had nothing to say, no snide remark. He gripped my chin in his calloused hand and forced me to look him in the eye.

"Don't you want to scream at me? Beg me to let you down? Don't you have anything to say?" he growled.

I took as deep a breath as the pain allowed and spoke in a strained whisper. "I have plenty to say, Abner, and most of it is four letters long. Instead of saying something ugly though, I've decided to satisfy myself with this." I spit in his face and smiled.

"Arrgh!" He slapped the grin off my face and scowled at me as he wiped the wetness from his face. "Since you won't ask how I intend to transfer your magic to myself, I'm going to show you because I have nothing better to do with my time at the moment."

I turned my gaze back to him and wore a neutral expression, lest I allow my absolute disgust to show. "How kind of you," I

mumbled, more sarcasm slipping into my voice than I wanted.

"It's simple really," Abner said, ignoring my tone. He held out his hand, palm up, and cut a thin line into his own flesh. He did not flinch or draw a sharp breath or even blink. I was impressed that he could do something like that to himself. Then his hand began to heal. At first, I thought my mind was playing tricks on me because of the pain, but then I realized what I should have noticed immediately. His hand shone with a soft white glow, with Blessings, and the magic healed him. My magic healed him. He sheathed his stupid knife and flashed me a stupid smile. "Now, out of the kindness of my heart, I will release you."

He used Obscurities to break the chains around my ankles, which left me dangling from the ceiling by my wrists. He lowered the chains until my feet were flat on the floor, then broke the cuffs around my wrists with his new magic. I put my hand against the wall to steady myself, the pain washing over me in waves.

Abner went to the door and glanced over his shoulder at me. "Too bad healing you would be a waste of magic. Goodbye, Lucian," he said as he shut the door.

I put my back on the wall and slid down it, crossing my legs and dropping my head in my hands. My body was on fire with the burn of the cuts, and I could do nothing to heal myself without magic. I did not know why I had ever decided this was a good idea. How could I save my father when I did not even know how to save myself? The entire situation felt hopeless. I felt sick to think that Abner would be able to create his new world, gather his army of people with Obscurities, control everyone and everything, and kill those who opposed him.

I huffed and pushed myself to my full height, meaning to walk toward my father. With my hand on the wall, I managed to get more than halfway before a wave of agony sent me to my knees. I grunted as I caught myself with my hands. As my arms began to shake under my weight, my father reached over to lean me against the wall with a strength I had not known he possessed. I smiled resignedly at him and closed my eyes, but he patted my cheek and held my head up so I could see his eyes.

"Stay with me, Lucian," he pleaded.

I nodded, and he pulled his hands away. "It's not like I have anywhere else to be," I whispered.

He smiled tiredly. "I'm going to heal you, okay? I need you to be still."

It took a moment for his words to register in my brain. "You're going to what?"

"Just . . . Keep still, son."

He placed his hands over the injuries on my body and my breath hitched in my throat. I resisted the urge to shove his hands away and yell at him to stop because he was hurting me. It did hurt when he touched me, it stung something awful. I had to let a gasp escape my lips after a short time and the rest of my breaths came in a similar fashion. I glanced down at Father's hands and saw the familiar white glow, but I recognized something perhaps even more amazing. As I watched, the cuts began to seal themselves. He removed his hands after a short minute, and the pain was replaced with a great sense of relief. My shoulders fell as I relaxed against the wall and steadied my breathing. The magic had not returned my strength, so when I reached out to hug Father, it was more like I fell into his arms.

"You . . . I don't . . ." I pulled away from him and shook my head. "How do you have magic, Father? I don't understand," I said.

He shrugged. "Magic is not something that can so easily be taken. There's light and dark in everyone, Lucian, and if you can see that, then you can see magic. I realized that when I first saw that boy, Nigel. He wants Obscurities, but he has Blessings. In him, there is a light stronger than the darkness and that is why he has Blessings."

"Then why do some people have Obscurities even if they use it for good?"

"Well, I believe that's why they call it Obscurities. No one knows why it works the way it does."

I nodded. "Then how do I get my magic back?"

Father smiled. "It was never gone."

I raised a brow but dutifully closed my eyes and held my hands before me. I pictured the orb of light that Father had shown me to make so long ago. I remembered the way it had healed a friend. Then I opened my eyes and watched it form in my hands, pulsing with the white glow of Blessings. I grinned and placed it in my father's hands. He swallowed it while I touched him with Obscurities and something like a miracle happened. Father's hair and age remained the same as they were, but his demeanor changed drastically. No longer was he pale and feeble, but he actually seemed healthy, and the color returned to his face. I let my Obscure hand—the one with dark magic—slide down to the chains that embraced my father. I closed a fist around them, and the metal crumbled to dust before my eyes. I did the same for his chained feet and more dust fell to the floor. He

rose to his feet, steady as ever, and pulled me up beside him.

"That, Lucian, is the way magic was always meant to be used."

I smiled at him, but it was halfhearted. I had healed him and returned a little of his strength, but he was still weak. I pursed my lips and could not meet his eyes. "Father, I'm sorry. I need you to stay here and wait. I don't want you to get hurt again."

He furrowed his brows. "I'm not going to let you leave again. You'll get yourself killed."

"Everyone keeps saying that. What do you think I'm going to do? I'm not a complete idiot, you know."

"I'm worried for you, that's all. If anyone else told you that, I'm sure they're worried too. You need to let me help you."

I stepped backward to the door slowly. "I can't let you help. What I'm going to do only requires one person. It's what everyone wants, and it's what I'm going to give them after I find Abner."

Father took a step closer. "Lucian, no. Whatever you mean to do, don't. Stay here where it's safe or let me help you."

My back pressed against the door, and I held a hand by the knob. "You can't help. You already tried once, now it's my turn."

His eyes widened in realization. I took that as my cue. The hand beside the doorknob shone with Blessings and a key formed in my fingers. I unlocked the door and yanked it open, shutting it and locking it with my father still in the room. He tried to turn the knob, then pushed against the door. He could have used his magic to escape, but he was not thinking clearly. Even so, I would not take that risk. I pressed a finger against the keyhole and used my magic to weld it shut. With my other hand, I used dark magic to cool it and to freeze it. I knew he would eventually get out, but this would at least slow him down.

I heard his voice through the concrete as I was leaving. "Lucian, stop. Come back here. Please," he called.

I turned away from the door and wiped the tears from my eyes. "I'm so sorry."

I ignored the rest of his pleas as I walked down the hall. I knew if I listened, he would persuade me one way or another to let him out and I would not put him in danger. Also, he would stop me from doing what I was determined to do, and I did not want him to do that either. I convinced myself it was better this way. My heart was heavy as I told myself those things, but I disregarded it and continued down the hallway.

As I had seen it in my memories and once in person, door zero

was not difficult to find. I noticed that Nigel was no longer standing by the door. I supposed he had gone to train or whatever. I knocked on the door to see if someone would let me and was pleased to hear Abner's voice on the other side. I opened the door and went directly to Abner's desk, relishing his baffled expression, if only for a second.

"How did you escape? No, that doesn't matter. How did you heal yourself? Wait, don't answer that either. What do you want?" he finally sputtered out.

"I'm glad you asked. I want you to return to me what you stole," I said.

"Impossible. Even if I wanted to do that, it can't be done."

I grinned and placed my hands flat on his desk, leaning nearer. "I can think of a way to get it back."

He flinched, barely, but I saw it. "Please. You would never be able to do that to me. I have men who would give their lives for mine."

I glanced back at the guards by the door and raised a brow. They both held their glowing hands out, threatening to use their magic. I sighed and reached down to touch the ground with Obscurities, encasing them in ice stained with shadow. I know that sounds terrible and heinous, but I assure you they were not dead. I would never use my magic to kill another human being. They were only frozen. I returned my gaze to Abner.

"I'm sure they would, but not for the reasons you think." I gestured toward the unmoving men. "They're horrified of you, Abner. The only reason they would die for you is because they think if they don't, you'll kill them anyway. Honestly, I wouldn't put it past you."

He rose from his chair and glared at me. "I haven't killed anyone. I'm doing all of this for the new world. Your father didn't know what he was doing when he made Desolara. He made the world worse for everyone. I'm going to fix his mistake."

"What are you going to do when you're done with the new world? Do you even know how to make something like that? Do you know how much magic you'll need?"

"I have your magic!" His voice faltered when he glanced at the frozen men. "I'm going to make the new world, and I'm going to be its commander. With the army I've built, no one will stand in my way."

I shook my head. "Why do you think I'm here?"

Abner used Obscurities to cast the room in shadow, then he jumped on me and shoved me against the wall. I used light magic in

my eyes so I could peer through the shadows, and I saw him press his knife against my neck. "I should have killed you and your father years ago," he snarled.

I grabbed his wrist with my hand and used Blessings to heat it up, scalding him. He cried out and jumped back, the shadows in the room seeping away. I grabbed his knife from the floor and held it in both hands, one shining white the other black. I closed my eyes and felt it begin to shatter in my hands. The blade broke into pieces and scattered over the concrete like glass. I dropped the handle on the desk and turned around to find Abner, but he was gone.

I left the room and ran toward the exit, wondering why he had not sent his men after me. I noted that my father's door was still shut, and I was glad that he was somewhere safe. I stopped short of the exit, however, when I saw a small army there. At the front of the men dressed in black stood Nigel, whose hands shown with a soft glow. A soft *white* glow. I stepped close enough to touch him and I noticed the anger in his gaze.

"Nigel, why don't you help me stop Abner? I can make a new world for us, for your family. You know this isn't right," I whispered.

"You're wrong. When he makes the new world, he's promised to give me Obscurities. He doesn't break promises, Lucian."

"Okay, but please don't fight. I don't want to hurt you. I just need to talk to Abner. Please, Nigel, step aside."

"I can't do that."

He made a signal with his hands and the guards encircled me. I rubbed my hands together and blew light magic into all their faces. They toppled like dominoes. Nigel was not in the circle though and my magic missed him. I spun around in time to see a glowing figure touch my bare chest. My body filled with a searing pain, and I collapsed to the hard concrete, barely able to suppress a cry. Nigel knelt beside me, increased the pressure, and stared at me.

"I can't let you ruin my only chance," he said.

I reached up and gripped his wrist. "I'm not trying to stop you. I want to help you, but this isn't the way to do it," I gasped.

"Then how would you suggest I do it?"

"Help me stop Abner. I can make the new world the right way. The way it's supposed to be. Please."

The burning lessened enough that I could breathe, and I took the opportunity to suck in a breath. He turned away from me so I would not see his expression and spoke quietly. "Could you give me Obscurities?"

I winced, thinking about what I planned to do with magic, and shook my head. "No, but that's not—" He cut me off by increasing the pain again. I screamed and tightened my hold on his wrist. My eyes closed and I used my own magic, my Obscure Blessings, to stop his magic. I imagined the light leaving his hand and vanishing from Desolara. I felt my own magic stutter and my hand dropped to my side, but I no longer felt the constant searing pain. I opened my eyes and sat up slowly, wincing at the crimson handprint on my chest. I touched it with my own hand and flinched as I used a small amount of magic to heal myself. I got to my feet and looked down at Nigel's shocked and frightened face.

"W-what did you do?" he stammered.

"I took away your magic." I glanced at the guards passed out around me and steadied myself against the wall. "I think."

He stood up and balled his hands into fists. "Well, give it back."

I shook my head and backed up. "I can't do that," I said, mimicking his own words.

"Why not?" he spluttered.

"I need to stop Abner. Please, Nigel, stay here."

"No. I won't sit back and watch you destroy everything we have worked so hard for!"

He ran toward me, and I naturally held my hands up in defense. I let my hands glow with Obscurities and reached out to touch him, effectively rendering him unconscious. I spun on my heel and ran through the Cage's doorway, only coming to a halt when I saw Abner. He was on his knees with his hands raised toward the sky, as though in prayer. One of his hands shone with black and the other with white. Nothing in Desolara had changed yet, but I knew it was imminent. I raced in his direction and skidded to a stop in front of him. He did not seem to notice me, so I reached down in an effort to rid him of his magic, but apparently, I broke his focus. He pushed me to the ground, and I landed hard on my shoulder. I rolled to my back as he loomed over me with a deep scowl on his face.

"What do you think you're doing?" he whispered threateningly.

I stood and glared at him. "I was hoping we could talk."

He chuckled darkly. "Why would I waste my time talking to you?"

"I don't want to hurt you, Abner. In fact, I want to help you."

"Help me . . . make a new world?"

"I want you to let me do it."

"I don't think so."

"Abner, please. Listen to me. I—"

"No. I'm sick of listening to you. Get out of my way or I'll have to hurt you."

I sighed and did not move an inch. "I'm not going anywhere. You must know that what you're trying to do is not going to—"

"I told you I don't care!"

He kicked me back to the grain covered ground and turned me over with his boot. I felt him press me into the sand, then he put his hand over my head and the Obscurities seeped inside me. At first, it hurt like a thousand needles piercing me, but then I only knew the coldness. I had never been so abysmally freezing in my life. I shivered violently until the iciness wore off and I was warm. Well, I was warm a millisecond before I caught on fire. The flames licked my back and the pressure released. Immediately, I rolled over and over to extinguish the inferno. I rolled to my stomach and lay there, unmoving. I could feel the stale air sting my back and arms. If I moved, I was fairly positive my skin would crack and fall off in sheets. Nonetheless, I gritted my teeth through the pain of sitting up and pleaded with my magic to heal me. I was unsure how much magic I had left, but I knew it could not be a lot.

I expected to see Abner kneeling again, but instead he crouched before me. I noticed a bit of madness in his gaze. "Do you have a death wish?"

I relaxed a little when I felt the gentle warmth of Blessings. "No. I only want you to understand—"

"I understand *perfectly*. You want to be the commander of the new world. You can't stand to see me take your place."

"That's . . . No. That's not true at all. Listen, and—"

"And you'll help me? You'll explain everything to me in fabulous detail? Not this time, Lucian. You won't be around to see the new world."

I only had time to push myself back before his hand caught my wrist and the dark magic crawled slowly up my arm, chilling my bones. I winced when his grasp became uncomfortably powerful, and when I was about to make an attempt to take his magic, something happened. A body flew into Abner and forced him away from me, both figures tumbling across the sand and down a small slope. I glanced at my arm and sighed in relief to see that it was normal, then turned my attention to healing the burns. It only took a short time for the blisters to vanish and the roasted flesh to fix itself.

I jumped to my feet and ran to see a girl standing over Abner's

limp body. Her hair was frizzy, and she had familiar green eyes. I jogged down to Amara and stared at her. Her eyes widened when she saw me then darted away.

"Amara . . . What are you doing here?" It was impossible to keep the hurt and anger out of my tone.

"I couldn't just let them hurt you, Lucian." Her eyes shifted in every direction except mine. "They didn't, did they?"

"I'm fine," I muttered, which was not entirely true. Every inch of me ached, my head pounded, and the exhaustion of it all made me want to crumple and sleep for a year. I did not want her to know any of that because I knew she would only ask questions that I could not answer. Instead, I gestured toward Abner. "What did you do to him?"

She looked at him guiltily. "I didn't do anything. We fell down the hill and when I untangled my limbs from his, he wasn't moving."

I studied Abner closely and gasped. I watched as he raised his Obscure hand in Amara's direction, his intentions clear. I froze. My feet glued themselves to the ground and I could only watch, as though in slow motion. His hand grew frighteningly black. Amara turned away from me and screamed, but she seemed unable to move as well. Someone shrieked her name, and that finally got me moving. I reached out to pull her toward me, but I was too late. Nigel pushed me away and fell onto his sister, shielding her from the magic. I saw what looked like shadow scuttle over the sand, then Abner bolted. Not wanting to see what had happened, I raced after him.

He seemed to be losing strength from expelling too much magic. I was fatigued also, but I was out of time. I had to get rid of his magic the moment I was near enough. My lungs cried for oxygen as I ran, not daring to slow for an extra breath. I picked up my feet and urged my legs to move quicker when I noticed Abner stumble. I came close enough to reach him and my hand shot forward, snagged his shirt, and sent us both to the ground. I closed my eyes and remembered the way I had seen Nigel's magic flow away, dispelling it from Desolara for good. When I was ready, I touched Abner's arm and felt the magic leave me, go into his body, then drift away.

I crawled away from him and fell into the sand. I stared up at the speckled sky and my heart slowed to a moderate pace. I let out a slow breath and thought about the new world. I thought about terra fever and about my mother, wondering if it would be possible to heal them all. I imagined a world entirely different from Desolara and magic leaked out of me into the grains of sand underneath.

I shivered and made to wrap my arms around my body, but

Abner kicked me viciously. I cried out and scampered away, despite my protesting muscles. He yelled in rage and kicked me in the gut, my breath leaving in an instant. He dropped to his knees and gripped my shoulders painfully. "What have you done? I'm ruined! You . . . you stole my magic!" He shook me. "I want it back! Give me my magic."

I coughed and lifted my eyes. "I'm sorry," I muttered helplessly.

His eyes bulged as he threw me to the ground, planting a heavy boot on my chest and making it rather hard to breathe. "You don't get the right to be sorry after what you did!"

I shrugged. "Sounds like a personal problem, to be honest," I gasped.

He growled and dropped on top of me. The grains shifted under our mass, and I did not have the strength to twist away. However, I would not need strength. I moved my arms between our bodies as he was reaching up to strangle me. I focused on my magic and knew there was some left in me. With my Blessings and Obscurities, I shoved Abner away and watched as he thudded heavily into the grains twenty feet away and didn't move again.

I pulled in several breaths to fill my lungs, then wasted no time in running back to the Cage's yard to find Amara. Yes, she had betrayed me, but then she had saved my life, and it was wrong of me to neglect her. I needed to thank her for saving me. The only problem was that I did not know if she was alive. Nigel had flung himself over her, that much I knew. I did not know who the shadow had hit, and I dreaded seeing either one of them lying dead in the sand. My body screamed at me to curl into a ball and stay there, but I could not. I had to know, so I kept going.

When I made it there at last, led only by the light of the moon and stars, I choked on my own breath. Only a few feet away was Amara and her brother. Neither one had moved an inch. I staggered over to them and pushed Nigel off his sister, his body landing heavily. I pressed my fingers to his neck and felt nothing. I pursed my lips and turned away from him. Amara's chest rose and fell steadily, I noticed immediately. I put a hand on her forehead and begged it to glow with light magic, begged it to heal her. I sat there for what felt like ages before her head shifted. I pulled my arms around myself so she would not see them shake and forced myself not to shiver when she sat up and met my gaze.

"Lucian, I'm so sorry. If I had known what . . ."

Her voice drifted when I began to shake my head. "No, I understand, Amara. I know why you wanted to do it, and it's okay.

I'm okay and you're okay," I breathed.

A tiny smile shone on her lips for a brief moment. "I did something else you won't like."

"What?"

"I brought them with me. El and the twins and Daisy, they're all here. I thought, maybe, they could help."

"Amara—"

"I don't know what I was thinking."

"Amara, where—"

"I'm so stupid, Lucian. I should have known better."

I gripped her shoulders and ignored the chills. "Where are they now?" I asked.

"They're in an abandoned asylum near here. They're safe."

I released a breath, and my heart grew heavy with what I had to tell her now. "Listen, Amara, Nigel saved you. He . . . he gave—"

She pulled away from me and moved me out of her way. "No."

"He gave his life for you and—"

Amara cradled him in her arms. "No, no, no," she muttered, tears staining her face.

I rose to my feet but stayed a respectful distance from her. "Nigel did the right thing, Amara. I want you to know that. He never stopped caring about you or his family. He sacrificed himself so you could live in a better world."

She buried her face in her hands and cried. "NO! No, Nigel, no. Why did you have to do that? Why?" She laid her head on his chest and hugged him. "Oh, Nigel, no."

I turned away from her and stumbled to the Cage, my tired feet dragging through the sand. I put both hands on the rough brown concrete and shut my eyes, closing the world from my thoughts. I imagined the new world one more time, saw the animals dance playfully through the green sand. I whispered to the earth to swallow the Cage, freeing everyone inside. I sent Blessings toward those with illnesses, with blindness, with deafness, and with terra fever. I wanted every person in the new world to have everything they needed. There would be winding trenches of clear water, delicious fruits that would grow by the homes. I pictured the asylums much differently in my head and then I felt my hands drop to my sides, the dregs of my magic healing everything else.

I dropped to the ground and pulled my legs close, fighting the cold and the pain to no avail. I looked to Amara, and she glanced in my direction as I fell against the Cage. I could not understand the

words that came out of her mouth. I saw her lips move urgently, but I did not comprehend them. I thought I heard someone, not Amara, call my name desperately. Amara ran toward me . . . No. She ran toward someone I could not see, and I think she spoke with them. I shivered and squeezed my eyes shut as a fresh twinge shot through me. I saw someone kneel beside me, grip my shoulders determinedly. I did not recognize who it was through my blurred vision, but I figured it was someone who deserved my apology. I let my tears tumble down my face.

"I'm so sorry," Cyrus's son breathed.

Cyrus watched helplessly as Lucian's eyes closed and he slumped in the man's arms. His heart was still beating, thankfully, but haltingly. The use of so much magic to change the entire world had been too hard on him. It had drained everything in him, and it had almost taken his life. If only he had been able to witness his new world, then perhaps he would have been shocked back to life. That was not the way it was meant to be though.

Cyrus laid his son in the soft grass and looked him over carefully. His skin was deathly white except for his cheeks that burned red with fever. His lips were chapped and pale, his skin was covered with goosebumps. There did not appear to be any physical injuries. Cyrus pressed his hands on Lucian's chest, and they shone with Blessings, healing him. The boy relaxed, and his eyes fluttered briefly, but that was it. The magic faded away too quickly and Cyrus dropped his head in his hands defeatedly.

Amara and several other children gathered around Lucian in the grass. The youngest, a little girl with teary brown eyes, leaned into Cyrus and placed a meticulously folded sweatshirt into his lap. He looked up and turned to her, and she smiled proudly.

"It's for Lucian. He gave it to me, but I think he needs it now," she said in a gentle voice.

He thanked her and pulled his son close to him, sliding the shirt over his unresponsive head and slipping his arms through the sleeves. The shirt was large on him, but it would offer him warmth and comfort. The boy's father stared at him for only a moment more before wrapping his son in an embrace and wetting his hair with tears. Amara and the little girl and the boys stayed near and wept with him, as their hearts ached to see Lucian's father so heartbroken.

As the sun was beginning to rise on the new world, Amara laid a kind hand on Cyrus's shoulder and got his attention. "Have you tried using magic?" she asked hesitantly.

"I don't have any magic left to try," he replied.

She looked at Lucian's chest and saw how gradual his breath had become. "I don't mean to intrude, but—" she held out her Blessed hand "—may I?"

He nodded resignedly and lovingly set his boy on his back in the grass once more. Amara scooted next to Lucian and put her hand on his forehead, sending light magic into his system. They sat there for a long time. The boys played a game with the young girl when the sun was in the middle of the blue sky. When night arrived, Amara removed her hand, lest her magic fade as well. Cyrus agreed they would return to the asylum upon Amara's suggestion. Lucian was held in his father's arms as they walked, the young girl held hands with another girl who looked just like her, and the boys held each of Amara's hands.

When they reached the asylum, it was hardly recognizable. The wood was a pristine white, the roof was shingled in black. Green vines with little white flowers grew upon the exterior of the asylum. The windows were broken no more and the door was black with a window of its own. Cyrus, followed by the children, carried Lucian inside and explained what he could. He did not know many of the answers to many of the questions he was asked, and he was exhausted as it was. He finally had a moment alone and he brought his boy to his bed, pulling the thick white blanket to his chin and laying several thinner covers over him. He pulled a chair by the bed and watched over Lucian until his own eyes grew heavy.

I opened my eyes to a place I did not recognize. The walls were light blue, the floor was a dark wood, and the window was unbroken. The blankets I was covered with were soft and warm. The duvet was thick and white. Something about the room, however, felt inviting and familiar. I shivered under the blankets as the memories from before rushed back. I wondered how long it had been since that day, or if I was even alive. I sat up and suppressed a cry at the harsh soreness of my body. I felt like I had run for a year, then done a hundred full-body workouts, all one after the other.

It was not until I dangled my legs from the side of mattress, meaning to stand up, that I noticed a man by my bed. His hair was brown and silvery, his beard similar in color. The way he held his head in his hands, it was impossible to tell what color his eyes were, but to me, those things did not matter. I would have recognized him if he were hairless. I did not want to wake him, so I dropped my feet to the floor and pushed myself to my full height. I did not know where I

intended to go but I knew that I did not want to stay in my bed another minute. I had taken only a few steps before my legs folded beneath me, and I would have collapsed to the floor if my father had not been there to catch me. He held me by the shoulders and met my eyes. There was no smile on his face, I noticed.

"How—"

"I'm sorry, Father. I should never have locked you in there. I shouldn't have left you. I shouldn't have—" I felt the tears gather in my eyes.

"Stop, Lucian. I don't care about any of that. What did you think I was going to say?"

I shrugged feebly. "I don't know. How could you do something so stupid and mindless?"

"No. Why would I ever say that? That's rhetorical, just so you know," he replied. He kept his hands on my shoulders as he led me to the bed and sat me down, pulling the blanket around my shoulders. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm okay," I told him.

"Liar."

I sighed and suddenly felt exhausted with the questions and the magic and was glad to be rid of it. "I don't want to talk about it," I muttered, and the dam in my heart splintered then. I thought about how confused Abner must be, I remembered Nigel's still body, and all of it was my fault. I had changed the world, but I could not bring Nigel back nor reason with Abner. Tears fell down my flushed face while my father held me. I buried my face in my father's shoulder and cried for a few moments, and when I was calm and I trusted my voice, I turned to Father.

"Is Amara all right?" I asked as I brushed the tears away.

A smile tugged at his lips. "She's doing better than you."

"Can I talk to her?"

"Of course, but there's someone else that wants to see you."

I stood up beside him and shuffled out the door. Father opened the door across from mine and I realized for the first time that we were in Amara's home. We were going to my mother's room. My mother, who was on the verge of death. I paused and did not step past the threshold. My father spun around when he noticed my absence and returned to my side.

"If you're not feeling well, you should rest."

"No, it's not that. I . . . We're going to see Mother, aren't we?"

"Yep."

I shifted from foot to foot. "I can't."

"Is something wrong?"

"Nothing."

He shrugged and took my arm, guiding me into her room. I could not believe what I was seeing. There was my mother, perfectly healthy. She did not have a hair out of place. She pulled me into a hug, and I automatically returned her embrace, wincing a little. When she pulled away, there was a smile on her lips.

"Lucian, you're here. I . . . I'm cured. We all are. There's no more terra fever. There's no more sand. No more Cage." She kissed my forehead. "You really did it."

My head pounded to think about it, and I felt dizzy. "I need to sit down."

Father scooped me up in his arms and laid me back in my own bed. "You can talk to her later," he said while covering me with more blankets.

"Father," I said. "I need to speak to Amara. Will you ask her if she'll talk to me?"

"I will."

He left me on the bed and I waited for her to walk through the door and blame me for letting her brother die, and I would agree with her wholly. I could have convinced him, I know I could have, but he had died for nothing instead. All he wanted was to see the new world and have Obscurities. I had taken that from him. I had let him and Amara down.

That was not at all how it happened. She walked through the door with a weak smile on her face and she threw her arms around me. I pulled away from her and coughed lightly.

"I'm so sorry about Nigel—"

Like my father, she interrupted me. "I don't blame you, Lucian. I can only blame him for jumping on top of me, but I'm not going to. He died to save me, and I'll always be thankful."

"But I could have helped him. I was so close to changing his mind, Amara."

She smiled. "You did change his mind. Don't you see? You were the reason he protected me. It was because of what you told him."

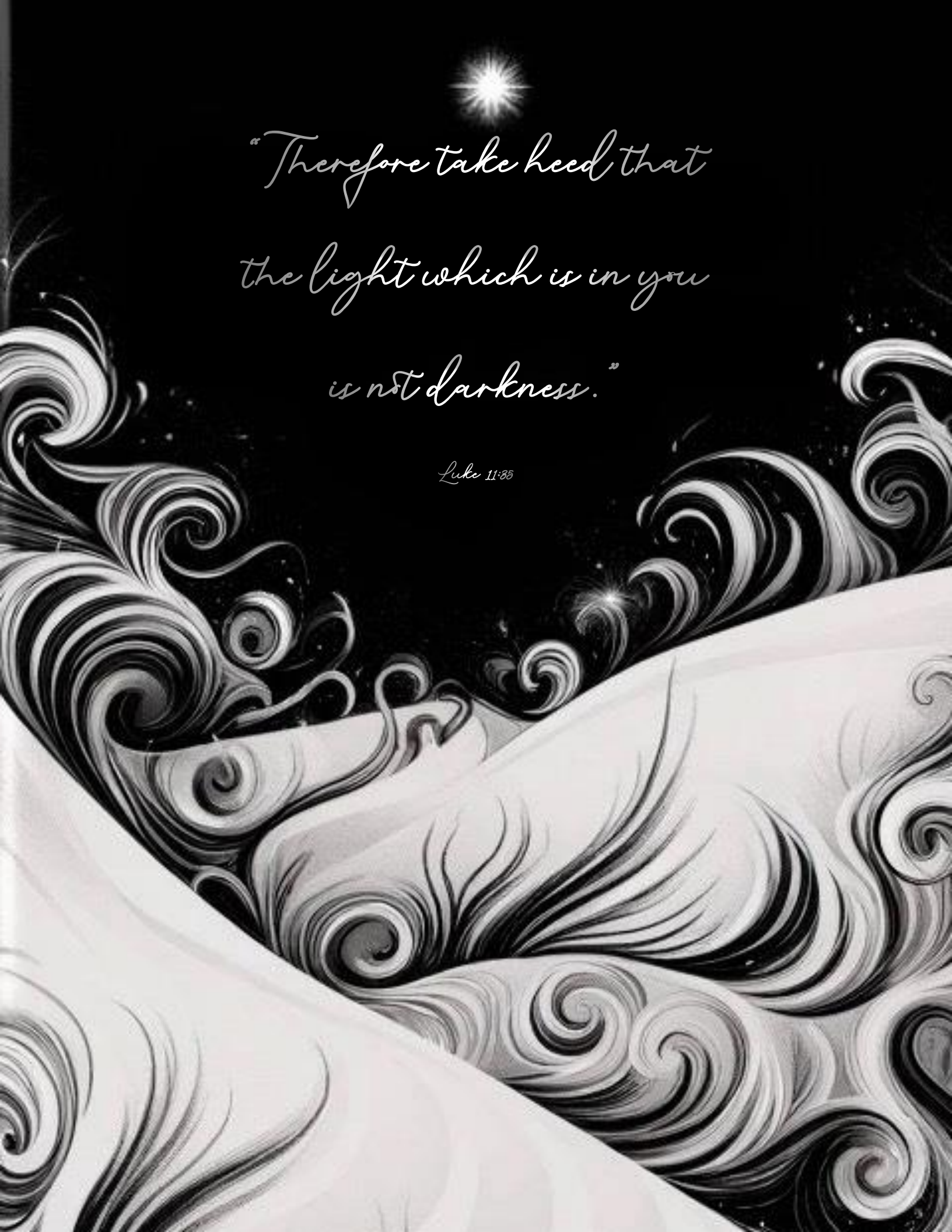
"I . . ."

Amara pointed through the window. "You did that, Lucian."

I followed her finger and saw the leaves on the trees. I saw the grass sway on the ground, the butterflies flutter about. It was beautiful. It was a new world, and it made my heart swell with joy.

I grinned. "Thank you."

"What for?" she whispered. I put my arm around her, and she put her head against my shoulder. "Company."

The background of the image is a black and white illustration. It depicts a turbulent sea with large, swirling waves. The sky is dark, featuring a single, bright, multi-pointed star at the top center. The overall mood is dramatic and spiritual.

*"Therefore take heed that
the light which is in you
is not darkness."*

Luke 11:35